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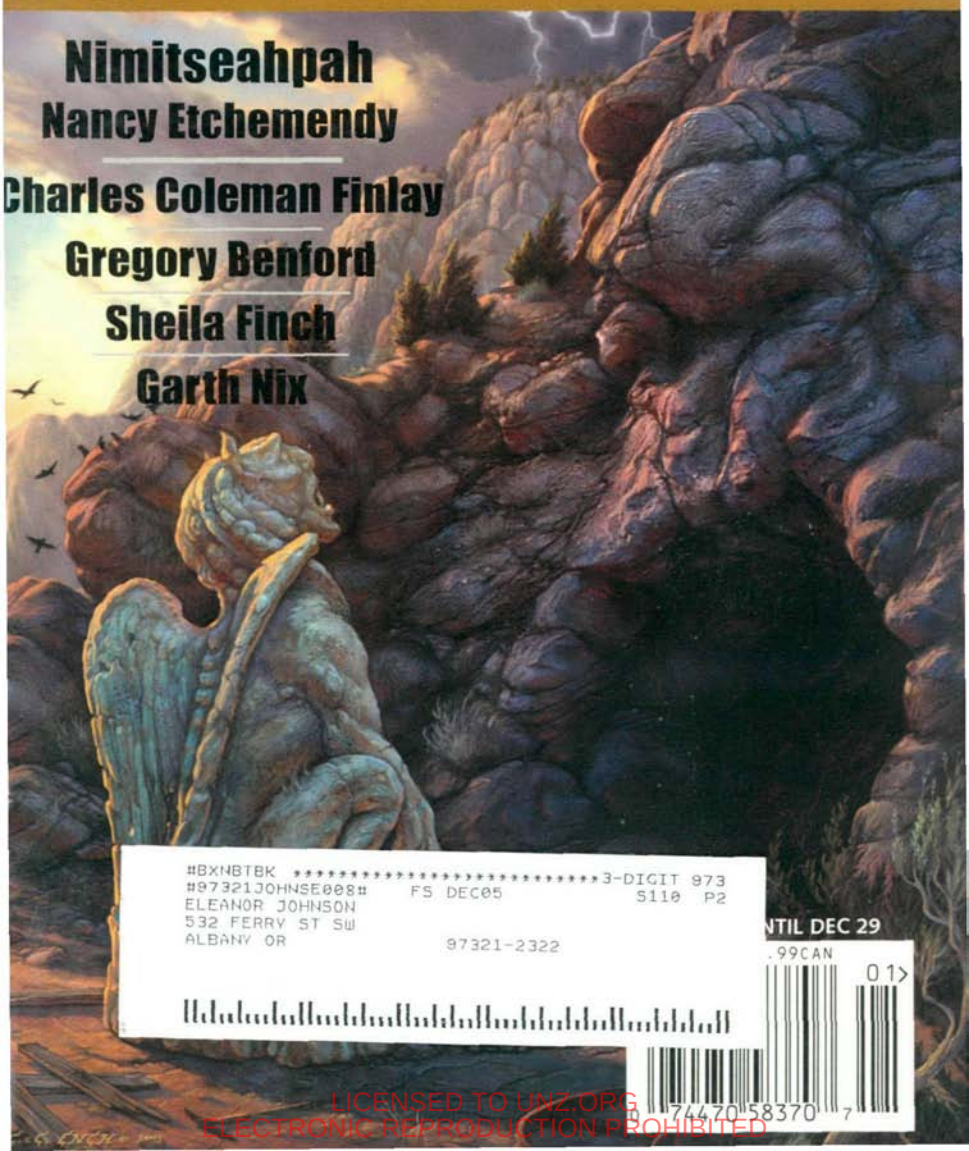

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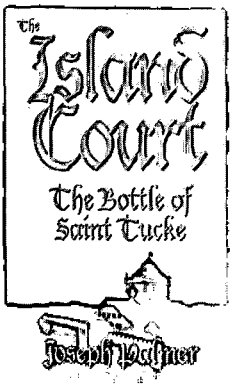

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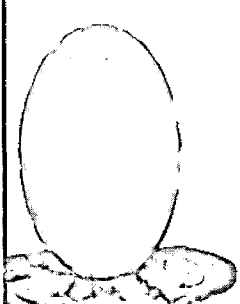

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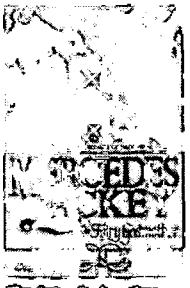

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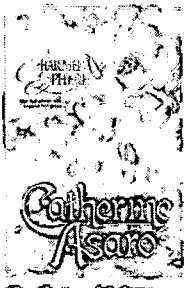

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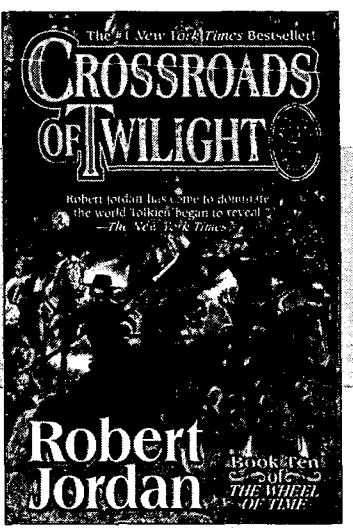
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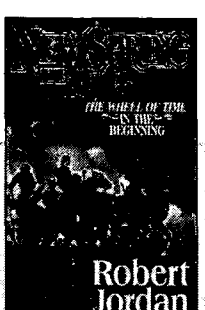

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Nancy Etchemendy's last story to appear here, "Demolition" (in our April 2001 issue), was a finalist for the Bram Stoker Award. Her most recent book is Cat in Glass and Other Tales of the Unnatural, *a collection of eight stories. She says a YA science fiction novel, tentatively called* The Harrilore, *is scheduled for publication in 2004. "Nimitseahpah" returns to the Nevada mining country where so many of her stories are set for a memorable tale of about a young woman and some unusual students.*

Nimitseahpah

By Nancy Etchemendy

IF YOU ASK ME FOR A STORY on a night like this, when the wind howls through the canyons like a live thing, there's only one I can tell. I know well when I've gone up to bed, some of you will whisper that I'm just an old and crazy widow who should, by rights, be dead by now. How well I understand that there are truths too frightening to believe. But truths these are. The events I recount to you now have haunted me every windy night for more decades than I care to number — since the days when gold and silver mines were the lifeblood of this town, and evil could be recognized and felt and guarded against, or so we thought. Bring me that quilt. Stoke up the fire, and I'll begin.

The year was 1905, just barely, for it was mid-January when Jesse took me on our first outing to the old Pahpocket Mine and its fabulous sentinel.

The mineral boom in Pactolus seemed to be tapering off in earnest, and families were leaving in a slow, steady trickle. Nobody knew whether the community would pull through or not. If the town had been a human

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being, a doctor would have advised making out a will and setting things in order, for the situation seemed grave.

It was a sad and frightening time for all of us. Certainly, it was for Jesse and me. We had only been married a couple of years. Ten months of that, we had spent here in the desert, eighty miles from nowhere, because Jesse was a mining engineer fresh out of college. He'd had several job possibilities, but Pactolus won because the Double Silver Company offered us a house along with his pay — a *big* house, and we wanted lots of children. Now the town was dying.

I felt as if I were dying, too. I had just lost the third of our babies, a little boy who had arrived much too early and stillborn. It had left me weak and pale, unable to look into my own heart for fear of what I'd find there. The Pactolus cemetery seemed awash in dead babies, not just mine, but everyone else's, too, and sometimes their mothers as well. I couldn't speak to God anymore, though I didn't understand why. If I hadn't been trying so hard not to feel anything, I'd have realized I was furious at Him.

On this particular January day, a Saturday, the air was unseasonably warm — "a January thaw," the old-timers said. And Jesse, shaving shirtless at the washbowl, glad for the feel of fresh air on his skin, turned and caught me up in his arms and said, "Kezzie, let me take you on a picnic. It'll do you good. You don't have to work. Just sit. I'll put up a basket myself, if you're willing to eat squashed sandwiches." He smiled like a child. Oh, how we loved each other.

He told me as he sliced bread and spread it with a patchwork from the previous night's chicken dinner that he'd heard of a spot that sounded interesting. The abandoned Pahpocket Mine.

So I put on an old skirt. The roads were knee-deep in mud and I didn't want to ruin one of my good ones. Jesse saddled up Tailings, our horse, and we rode double and slowly through the sagebrush and junipers to the Pahpocket. As we plodded along with the warm sun on our shoulders, Jesse told me what Davey, an old miner he knew, had related to him about the place.

Forty years before, the Pahpocket Mine had been one of the richest in the country. It was, as well, the deepest in history as far as anyone knew, and there should have been many who knew, for the entire state was aswarm with mining experts in those days. The miners were following a

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vein of gold ore that seemed to lead down and down, growing ever wider and richer.

Then that thing all miners dread came to pass. Something big went wrong, and almost all of the 150 men in the tunnels that day were killed. The details of the disaster were sketchy, Jesse said. Whatever happened was so unusual that the whole incident lay cocooned in legend and rumor. The survivors (there were very few) spoke of things no sane person believed. The mine had come to life. Or the miners had pierced the heart of darkness, and it had devoured them in retribution. All the machinery stopped at once — the air compressors, the big water pump, the man skips — and could not be restarted. Men were sucked bodily into the void, seven thousand feet down. Rescue parties disappeared. Not a single body was ever recovered.

Clucking softly to urge Tailings over a hillock, Jesse finished the story. "Davey says the owners tried to clean things up and reopen it, but they never managed to. Nobody would go down there anymore, not even the Chinamen, and you know they're not picky about work. People said the place was cursed. Those Cornish miners, you could understand them hanging back. But the Chinese? Now that's saying something."

Tailings trotted us over a rise, and there in a hollow at the foot of a hill, we saw what was left of the Pahpocket Mine.

Even as little time as I'd spent in mining country, I knew the place did not look right, considering the supposed size of the operation. True, there was a conical mountain of gray detritus, steep in its angle of repose, the guts of the Earth brought up yard by square yard. And the vicinity was scattered with the usual array of massive, rusted equipment. But, strangely, there were no intact buildings, just twisted heaps of corrugated tin. Even the head frame lay in ruins.

Because of this the main shaft gaped darkly from the hillside. The main shafts of the big mines I had seen were always obscured by housings and equipment. So exposed, this one appeared obscene somehow, like a dignified old man with his dentures out. I felt as if I had no business looking.

Yet I couldn't turn my gaze. For directly in front of this huge, empty mouth sat an incongruous, bone-pale figure of tufa stone, twice as tall as a man.

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We dismounted from the horse and I walked up for a better look, so astonished that I forgot to hold up the hem of my skirt, which was quickly soaked in snow melt. It was difficult to say whether the thing was just a piece of rock with an unnatural shape, or had been crudely carved somehow. Though I looked hard, I didn't find a single mark that could be said, without doubt, to have been made by a tool. I knew that tufa sometimes takes amazing and unlikely shapes with no human help at all, but this defied probability.

It didn't fit any easy description. Its great knob of a head seemed part lion and part man, though shapes like long, wolfish teeth parted its animal lips. It had a decorated headdress, or perhaps a thick, straight mane out of which peeked small misshapen creatures. Its seated body curved cougarlike, except for its legs, which might have been a horse's, or might have been a dog's. Its feet, encircled by oddly incongruous rusted iron chains, were half hidden beneath smaller versions of itself. Wings — which might once have had stone feathers — swept along its sides, though they were lumpish and asymmetrical. It faced not outward, toward the world, but inward, toward the mine, its neck arched back and its gaze turned skyward as if it longed to be gone from the Earth.

"What is it?" I said as Jesse came up behind me, carrying the picnic basket.

"They say it's an Indian version of a gargoyle. Set there to guard forever against the evil in the mine." He laughed, confident in the silliness of the story. "After the accident, Wuzzie Stovepipe and her tribe hauled it by mule team all the way from Niminaa Lake. Paid the driver in gold, too."

I knew something of Wuzzie Stovepipe — an ancient local Paiute woman who haunted the streets of town, dressed in a rabbitskin cloak and a hat made of magpie feathers. Many Indians we never knew, because they preferred the cleanliness and freedom of the desert and never came near Pactolus. Most of those we did know spent their time begging outside the saloon or drinking themselves stupid in the alleyways. But never Wuzzie. Wherever she went, she walked purposefully. Something in the way she carried herself, or the look in her black, black eyes, made men doff their hats and women nod in deference as she passed. I had felt the same impulse myself — shivering as we crossed paths outside the mercantile or the butcher shop.

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I knew, too, that Niminaa Lake was many miles away. The stone figure was massive, and must have required a dozen or more mules to pull it so far. Where would an old Indian woman have gotten so much gold?

I tried to laugh along with Jesse, but it came out forced. A strange certainty was building inside me, a kind of high-pitched resonance that began in the soles of my feet and rushed upward through my heart, a current of compassion for the dead men, or love, and surely gratitude to Wuzzie and her people, because I was convinced at that moment that the monstrous effigy was indeed protecting us from something.

I felt so overwhelmed that black spots swarmed before my eyes, and I lost my footing. The next instant, I found my face pressed against that strange, forbidding figure. The rough stone scratched my cheek. The tufa was slightly warm, from the desert sun I supposed, which can be strong even in winter. It had a disconcertingly good smell, perhaps because it was damp from thawing snow — powerful with potential like soil in spring. Even as I recoiled from it, I felt so oddly comforted that tears spilled down my cheeks.

It was the first time I'd been able to cry since I lost the baby. Jesse rushed to smooth my hair and whisper hushes in my ear, hugging me from behind. There I stood and wept a torrent, pressed between my husband and the palpable shield of the gargoyle, if that's what it was, finally able to begin the long process of releasing my grief.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, the clergyman from the Episcopalian church, Father Marshall, came to call. I invited him in.

Balancing a cup of tea and the last of our sugar biscuits on his knee, he said, "Mrs. Mayhew, I know you've had a difficult time these last few months. You've been in our prayers. So you needn't answer my question right away. But the mayor has sent me to ask if you might consider becoming our school teacher."

I was silent for a minute. The request was so unexpected it took a while to sink in. "But I thought we already had one," I said.

"Well, we did, but it seems the winter was too hard for her."

Yes, I thought. Deep snow and wind like a bitter fist. Half the mines played out, and nothing in the town to show for it except widows and

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fatherless children. People too depressed to speak to each other. The doctor gone. No library. No culture. The arrival of a single bolt of calico at the mercantile was cause for celebration, and the mail took two weeks, sometimes three, in each direction. Oh yes, I understood how a woman might find the winter too hard.

"What makes the mayor think I'm suitable for the position?" I asked.

Father Marshall smiled. "I approve of your modesty," he said. "But we understand you've been to college in the East. You are undoubtedly the most educated woman in Pactolus. And, well, it did occur to me that you might welcome some occupation just now. To keep from dwelling on your troubles, perhaps." He tilted his head in a friendly way.

I found myself returning his smile. Though I'd never taught before, the idea appealed to me. "I'll think it over," I said.

"We'd be grateful." Father Marshall stood to leave, and as I showed him to the door, he added, "It needn't be permanent unless you want it to be. I hope you'll accept."

I did think it over, but it didn't take me very long to arrive at a decision. He was right. Having been educated at Barnard and having traveled a little, I was an unusual woman in this remote place. I had no children of my own. I had nothing to do with my time but fuss around the house, bake things that used too much of our precious sugar, and replace the occasional lost button. It would feel good to be useful. And we could certainly stand the extra money, given that I'd married for love against my parents' wishes, so Jesse's modest income was all we had.

The next morning, I agreed to take the job, and a side of Pactolus I'd never seen before opened up to me.

I doubt there is any better way to know a town than to spend your days rubbing elbows with its children. The Pactolus school house was built to accommodate thirty students, but there were only eighteen that spring. Just as well, since I was as busy learning as they were.

The youngest was six, and the oldest a towering sixteen. There were eleven girls, most of them well mannered and eager to please. And there were seven boys, all of them problems of one kind or another. There were Jesus and Xavier, a sheepherder's sons who barely spoke English and seemed never to have touched books before. There were Phinney, Doyle,

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and Quince, who ranged in age from ten to thirteen, full of wild energy and thoughtless cruelty. Phinney's father ran a bar, Doyle's was a wild-eyed prospector, and Quince's — formerly a miner — was dead.

Then there were Nev Treleaven and Jacques Dechain, whom this story is really about — whose fates, as it turned out, were enmeshed with each other's, with the Pahpocket Mine, and with its strange guardian.

Nev looked to be thirteen or fourteen years old, dark of hair but fair of skin, with eyes like the sea off the Côte d'Azur. He sometimes sat outside the schoolroom and listened beside the window, but refused to come in. He told me once, after half an hour's coaxing, that he didn't like being in the school. It was too hot and small and full of people's smells. He couldn't breathe. Claustrophobia, I suppose. Indeed, he seemed half feral. More than once, I saw him running through the brush like an antelope or a mustang, for no apparent reason beyond the joy of it.

I asked about him at the mercantile whose proprietor, Mr. Oxoby, seemed to know something about everyone. It was there I learned, to my astonishment, that Wuzzie Stovepipe was the only mother Nev Treleaven had ever known. Oxoby said Nev's mother died giving birth to him. Nev's father, Dub, a taciturn miner raised in the hardrock country of Cornwall, was so entirely shattered by her death that he became a recluse, spending most of his time alone in the nearby hills. He was often gone for weeks at a time and would reappear in town with a bag of gold nuggets, or a wagon full of high-grade silver ore. Most people thought he must have a rich mining claim somewhere, but no one knew for certain.

Mr. Treleaven had made arrangements with Wuzzie shortly after his wife's death. The woman was to care for little Nevlin and mother him to the best of her abilities, in return for which she was compensated with gold, though Mr. Oxoby whispered behind his hand that there might be compensations other than gold, if I took his meaning — which I did, with a grain of salt.

The fact that Nev had been raised by a Paiute explained a lot about his behavior, and also about the way the other children treated him. They seemed frightened of him. I say this because they never teased him or made him the brunt of jokes to his face. They kept a rather respectful distance. But whenever they thought he wasn't looking, they called him a half-breed and a queer duck. They blamed every outbreak of head lice on

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him, even though he never had any physical contact with any of them and smelled better than some. They said his Indian mother had taught him black magic. Every piece of bad luck was a "Nev's curse." Nev was even blamed for big storms.

In short, he was an outcast, though he was probably the kindest and most attentive child in Pactolus. I have thought often about the reasons for this ostracism, down through the long years I've spent here. People always fear the unfamiliar, and Nev was certainly that — unknown and unpredictable in every way. But now and then, generally in the dark hours after midnight, a conviction rises in my mind unbidden: perhaps Nev Treleaven was outcast with good reason, for he was not entirely human. How else could the events I'm about to relate be explained?

Jacques Dechain, on the other hand, was more human than most.

His family did not arrive in Pactolus until March of that year — two months after I began teaching. They were from Paris. Professor Dechain had taken a leave from the Sorbonne to do archeological research on a group of unusual petroglyphs someone found in a narrow canyon on the far side of Niminaa Lake. Jacques was at that time the Dechains' only child. He was twelve, though I guessed ten when I first met him, not because he was small — he was about average height, and somewhat stocky — but because of the way he behaved. He had a quality of sweet dreaminess that led him to see the distant mountains as sleeping dragons and himself as a brave knight in exile. And he wept easily.

He and Nev had one thing in common, their difference from the others. Jacques spoke technically perfect English, though with a heavy, florid accent. The girls liked it, and Jesus and Xavier, who struggled with English themselves, didn't seem to notice it. But Phinney, Doyle, and Quince pranced around imitating it and roaring with laughter. In fact, they mocked him at every chance. They implied that he was a pansy because he wrote in lovely, well-practiced script. They made fun of his lunch, which his mother packed beautifully with linen napkin, silverware, and china plate. They even made fun of his name.

Boys of this sort seemed entirely outside Jacques's experience. He had no idea how to deal with them. He had virtually no sense of humor, and what he did have was utterly foreign to the other children. He didn't know

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how to fight, or how to deflect a taunt with sharp wit. So he became angry, or so upset that he cried.

Egged on by this ideal and hoped-for response, the bullies stole the leather-bound books of French philosophy with which he tried to impress them. He wore an unlikely hat of heavy, pale felt with a dandyish curve to the brim, and this they gleefully grabbed and threw into the mud. They sniped at him with tiny, stinging pebbles from their slingshots. They put horse manure inside his desk. Their imaginations knew no bounds when it came to tormenting Jacques.

I tried my best to protect him, but I couldn't hover over him every minute of the day, or keep watch when school was not in session. Besides, that only embarrassed him further. I did speak to his parents about the problem over tea one afternoon, but it didn't seem to help much. In the end, the best I could do was forbid the taunting during school hours, teach the children a little French, and hope the boys would work things out among themselves.

MEANWHILE, I had discovered that Father Marshall knew what he was about. The twin balms of time and preoccupation with other people were at work within me, as I'm sure he suspected they would be. My grief over the loss of our son, which I had carried in my heart all winter like the wound from a dark, bloody bullet, began at last to heal.

Healing is a strange thing, sometimes painful in itself, and sometimes hard to recognize for what it is. As spring progressed toward summer and the days lengthened, urges that I could neither explain nor understand overcame me. I felt a great need to wander the hills alone, where I could weep and wail as much as I wanted without fear of discovery.

I spent many afternoons that season walking through the brush fast and hard with only the most trivial of goals — a glitter on a distant hillside, an abandoned shack rising from the yellow-tipped scrub, an interesting rock formation. All the while my pain broke and rose like river ice in a thaw.

One such afternoon, I found myself obsessed by thoughts of the "gargoyle" at the Pahpocket mine. Though I had recalled the figure often since January, I had only seen it that once with Jesse. I think I was half afraid of it, or of the black hole it guarded.

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But on this day, I felt an almost lunatic need to find it again, to touch it, and to reassure myself that we were still safe and life would go on, for some of us at least. So I set off for the Pahpocket. I was tight and desperate inside myself at first, as always when I began these walks. But the day was bright and warm, the air tinged with the resinous scent of sage blossoms and the hum of hardy bees. I could see for miles with perfect clarity — desolate gray-green hills, stark shadows, stone outcroppings — and the longer I walked, the more beautiful it all seemed.

By the time I reached the Pahpocket, I was in what I had come to think of as my desert state of mind — calm, and almost eerily aware of my surroundings. I came over the crest of the hillock before the mine and discovered, to my surprise, that I was not the only one thinking of the stone figure that day. Jacques and Nev stood beside the thing, talking.

I wasn't quite close enough to hear what they were saying. And it seemed probable that Nev would fade away like smoke if he knew I was anywhere near. So, curiosity overcoming scruples, I crept among the boulders and clumps of sage till I reached a hidden rocky niche perfect for eavesdropping.

"It has a powerful name. Nimitseahpah. The Paiutes never say it aloud. They only whisper it, same as the old miners," I heard Nev say.

Jacques slapped the statue with the flat of his hand, as one might slap the flank of a favorite horse. He jerked away slightly, as if surprised at the way the stone felt, but unwilling to show it. "I've seen a lot of these. It's just a gargoyle, and rather badly made. A piece of stone with a silly face. They're everywhere in Paris."

Even from my distance, it sounded like false bravado. Or maybe I was just biased, for I remembered well the last time I had touched that pale figure. *Nimitseahpah*, I whispered to myself, savoring it, only at that moment realizing that I had been yearning to call the guardian by name.

"You're wrong," said Nev. "It's more than a stone. They put it here to hold back the darkness the miners disturbed. It has power. Can't you feel it?"

Jacques blinked and hesitated a moment before shaking his head almost stubbornly. "Feel it? What am I supposed to feel?"

Nev chewed at his lip, trying to explain something that seemed difficult for him. "The place where the light meets the darkness. The

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balance. It feels like...like the afternoon before a storm. A hum. Inside you."

With another shake of his head, almost disdainful this time, Jacques said, "Is this a joke?"

Nev gazed at him calmly. "No."

Jacques kicked at one of the chains that adorned the figure's feet. Nev's cheek twitched.

"Phinney and Doyle say you're crazy, Treleaven. Maybe it's true."

Laughing softly, Nev answered as he often did — with a question of his own. "They say you're a mamma's boy. Is *that* true?"

Jacques's face turned bright red, and he clenched both fists at his sides, his mouth working though no words came out.

Nev regarded him with an odd expression, somewhere between a frown and a smile. "They know you hate them. So they hate you back."

Words burst from Jacques at last. "I wouldn't hate them if they treated me better! Can't you see?"

"Doesn't matter. You can't make them do anything. You can only stop hating them."

"You *are* crazy!" said Jacques, and he laughed. It sounded almost like a bark. "They hate you, too, you know."

Nev looked off into the far distance, where the Desatoya mountains rose, purplish in the afternoon light. There was no longer any trace of a smile on his face. "No. They don't hate me. They fear me. I'm not like them. I'm not like anybody."

"I don't fear you," said Jacques, pulling himself up straight, looking insulted.

"You will," said Nev.

Without another word, he turned and began to walk away, out into the brush.

"Where are you going?" cried Jacques.

But Nev did not respond. His easy pace turned into a lope, and within seconds, he was gone from sight.

Jacques bellowed. It wasn't a word; just an angry shout. Stooping to seize a rock the size of his fist, he threw it into the mine shaft with the might of blind fury. The bang and rattle of its fall lasted a long time.

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The next day was May 2, 1905. A Tuesday. The date occupies a permanent place in my mind, as if burned there, or incised with a chisel. The dawn was clear, the morning unseasonably warm. The birds were silent and invisible, the noise of insects incessant.

Even before I rang the school bell, I knew it would be a difficult day. Tessie Penryn and her best friend Beth Young had a highly uncharacteristic hair-pulling fight on the playground over possession of a carved wooden horse.

I discovered Phinney hunched behind the fence in tears. His father, who slept late because of the hours he kept at the bar, had beaten him for making too much noise at breakfast. I helped him clean up at the hand pump, but no amount of soap and water could wash the bruises from his face, let alone from his angry young heart.

He took it out on Jacques. Phinney began by needling him about his accent, an old refrain to be sure, but on this day there was a new twist to the cruelty. Phinney swore at Jacques in French. This he had learned to do from Jacques himself, which I'm sure added injury to insult. Moreover, given Phinney's gift for mimicry, he did it abominably well. Quince and Doyle took up the chorus with great relish.

Everyone was out of sorts. The children bickered like sparrows at a feeder, and my patience gave way to sharp retorts more than once. I felt the tension, too, as if static electricity were building everywhere — in the rocks, in the sky, in the air between people, headed for the inevitable shock of discharge.

By two o'clock, a bank of ugly black clouds had appeared low in the sky southwest of town. Not long after, the Terrible Trio smeared a wad of juniper pitch into Jacques's hair. I made each of them stand in a separate corner of the classroom while I tried to get the sticky mess cleaned up. Jacques was in furious tears, and I had just resorted to scissors, when the door flew open with a crash.

We all looked toward it, shocked at the sudden noise. There stood Nev, the clouds gray and swirling behind him. The smell of dampened dust and sage drifted in on the breeze, an odor peculiar to the high desert, one that makes the hair on my neck rise to this day. It means there is rain not far off.

Nev was trembling visibly. "Big storm coming," he said. "Take

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shelter." Then he was gone again, running fast toward the center of town.

Before the door had closed, many of the children leapt from their desks into the aisles, babbling. There were even a few shrieks. I picked up a ruler and smacked it against my own desk. The noise got their attention, at least for a second or two.

"Students! Take your seats this instant," I said in my firmest teacherly voice.

"But Mrs. Mayhew, when Nev talks about storms, he's always right. Even my dad says so," said Sally Deidesheimer. She was usually so shy and quiet that this was the longest sentence I had ever heard her say.

Jesus, the sheepherder's towering son, stood up then. Gazing steadfastly at the floor, he removed his crumpled felt hat from his back pocket, pulled it onto his head, and said, "Meesus Mayhew, I gotta go tell Aita. I big sorry." With that, he grabbed his little brother Xavier and ran outside to find their horse.

After that, there was no stopping any of them. In moments, the room was empty. I stood in the open doorway, looking out. The breeze had picked up and the temperature was falling rapidly. The sky was a deep, bruised gray. The scent of coming rain permeated everything. The air was so charged with tension that it lifted my skin into goose flesh.

On the playground, Jacques Dechain, still nearly blind with fury, his hair sticking up in wild, pitch-stiffened spikes, had chosen this moment to exact revenge. He had managed to grab Quince's slingshot from its accustomed spot in Quince's back pocket. And he was shooting stones at his three enemies as quickly as he could pick them up. Most of his efforts went astray. I don't think he'd ever held a slingshot before, let alone practiced with one. But one pebble nicked Phinney on the cheek, leaving a shallow, bloody trail there below the eye his father had blackened that morning. It was more than Phinney could bear.

"I'll kill you, you little pansy bastard!" he screamed.

"Try it! Try it, I dare you!" cried Jacques. He took one last wild shot at Phinney with Quince's slingshot. It went wide, but before it landed, he was already running off through the brush.

Phinney yelled, "Get him!" And he and Quince and Doyle sped after Jacques in a way that looked serious indeed.

I called for them to stop, but they either didn't hear me or didn't care to.

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So I hitched my skirt around my knees in a fashion that probably would have made Father Marshall apoplectic, and ran after them through the rising wind.

Jacques was a fairly good runner — not in Nev's league, but a good runner nonetheless. He ran with balance, dodging whatever clumps of sagebrush he couldn't leap. And at first he was swift, opening a considerable gap between himself and his pursuers. But he didn't have their endurance. Slowly the distance narrowed. I was becoming winded, too, when I realized where he was leading us.

I lost sight of Jacques first. Then Phinney, Doyle and Quince, who were well ahead of me, too. But it didn't matter. I knew where they were going. I topped the now-familiar hillock above the Pahpocket Mine.

Jacques stood beside the misshapen stone figure, so out of breath that his sides heaved. Above his head, he held a rock so big I wondered how he'd ever had the strength to move it, let alone pick it up. His face was contorted with the effort of holding it aloft.

The other boys had stopped a respectful distance from him.

I shouted at them as I slipped down the hill toward the mine, but by then the wind was blowing in earnest, grabbing at our hair and clothes, peppering us with grit. And it carried my voice in the wrong direction.

As I got closer, I heard Doyle shout at Jacques, "Are you crazy?"

Jacques was in such a state that he was screaming at them in French. They couldn't understand him, but he didn't seem to notice, and even if he had, I think he was beyond caring. But I knew French well from my studies at college and from traveling abroad. And Jacques's words sent ice through my blood. Roughly translated, he was saying that he would fix them once and for all, and they would see who killed who.

"Stop it at once!" I shouted as I ran toward them.

Phinney turned toward me, his mouth open, and said, "Mrs. Mayhew?" clearly shocked to see me there.

"Yes! Jacques, put the rock down!" I said.

But poor Jacques Dechain had been driven far past his breaking point. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he laughed crazily. "I'll make you so sorry!" he cried, still in French. "I'll set it free. I'll make you so sorry!"

He turned toward the statue and all at once I saw clearly what he meant to do. There was something in the mine that could kill people in

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a moment. And Nimitseahpah was all that stood between Jacques and that power.

Who knows where Nev came from. Maybe he was watching from some hidden place, as I had done before. Or maybe he knew somehow what was happening at the Pahpocket. The children said he spoke the language of the wind, that it told him things no one else could understand.

Quite suddenly, he was lunging toward Jacques, shouting, "No! No!"

He literally flung himself through the air. I had already launched myself in Jacques's direction, too. I fell short, tumbling into the wind-blown dirt. Nev did not. He hit Jacques broadside, knocking him off his feet. But he was an instant too late. The massive rock had already left Jacques's hands. There was a hollow popping sound. I felt a sharp pain somewhere behind my eyes. I watched as the porous tufa of our guardian shattered, the anguished head leaving the obscene body, the body severed from the legs and their heavy shackles, in a spray of pale dust and inexplicable, brilliant light. Grief pierced me like a spear. I swear, I heard Nimitseahpah roar. I hear him roaring still, on nights when the wind blows into this valley, and I can never tell whether it is the sound of jubilation or of pain.

I didn't realize it, but a piece of the broken figure had hit me hard in the head. All I knew at that moment was that the world seemed oddly wrenched from its usual state.

Something as cold as a January night seemed to be dragging me through the sand toward the main shaft of the Pahpocket. I stretched out my arms, grabbing for an anchor point, and I found Nimitseahpah's heavy, broken base. I saw Phinney, Doyle, and Quince slide past me on their bellies, screaming. It felt exactly as if the ground around the shaft had tilted and risen upward like the sides of a funnel.

"Catch hold of me!" I cried.

The rest of it is very difficult to remember clearly. I have only a series of disconnected impressions to guide me. There was a terrible howling. The air was so cold. One of the boys caught my ankle. I had bruises from it later. I suppose it must have been Quince. I couldn't see him. I could only feel his white-hot grip and hear him screaming. I remember Phinney catching my elbow, and working his way up from there, so that he, too, held onto the remains of the statue. I had a glimpse of Jacques's face,

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slashed with horror, that made me think, poor Jacques. He hadn't thought far enough ahead to see his own danger, or he didn't care about it in the moment of his passion. Every child his age has such moments, though few are made to die for them.

What I recall most clearly is a brief impression of Nev. He stood miraculously upright, arms spread wide, his neck arched back in a posture for all the world like Nimitseahpah's. The black power of the mine drew his clothing and his hair toward it, but some other force held him where he stood.

I am certain he called, "Help me!" I thought at first he was calling to me, or to one of the children, or to God. A moment later, the air became opaque with flying objects —boards, branches, boulders, pieces of metal — and I realized he was speaking to the storm.

THERE BEGINS a gap in my memory. I awoke in my own bed. It was morning. The world beyond the window made me think of a china cup, brilliant white, and brilliant blue. It had snowed, but the sky was vivid and clear. The branches of the little plum tree in our yard drooped, the spring blossoms ruined.

Jesse told me there had been an accident at the Pahpocket. Jacques and Doyle were missing. The gargoyle was gone. There seemed to have been a cave-in. People were hoping I would know what had happened.

I knew in an instant that Jacques and Doyle were gone forever, down the throat of what Nimitseahpah had guarded so diligently, to lie beside the 150 men who already slept there. I knew as well that Nev Treleaven had saved my life, and Phinney's and Quince's. And that it was true what he'd said. He was not like anybody. Sooner or later, everyone who knew him feared him.

It was a long time before I could speak of it, or even think of it without great pain, and longer still before I could weather a storm without weeping again for all that year's dead children.

A few weeks after Pahpocket, I begged Jesse to take me away or send me home. He said, "Kezzie, mines are all I know. I could take you to Tonopah or Goldfield, but I don't think it would help much. They're

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bigger, sure, at least for now. But every mining town is boom or bust and full of death. If you left and went home, I...." He stared at the floor, then out the window. I watched the muscles of his jaw tighten and bunch, marring its fine, strong line. After a time, he cleared his throat, looked into my face, and said, "Stay with me. I promise I'll make you happy here."

I thought of mornings in our kitchen, his hand on my waist as he waltzed me across the floor, beaming at the sunrise. I thought of waking in a lonely bed two thousand miles away from him, in a clean and civilized place that never smelled of sagebrush and never contained his smile. And I thought of my schoolroom, and the sixteen children remaining, who might never learn to read or figure sums without their teacher. I kissed him and stayed.

Not that it was easy. It was two more long and sorry years before the 1907 bonanza strike at the Double Silver Mine turned things around for Pactolus. Jesse and I never did have children, much as we wanted them. But by and by, I grew to love all the children of Pactolus save one as if they were my own. And it sufficed.

That one, of course, was Nev Treleaven, who fended off love as if it were hailstones. He grew to manhood and married a Paiute no one in Pactolus had ever seen before — a beautiful girl as strange and wild as he. They had four children together, all named after trees, seasons, and other elements of nature. One died young, two moved away, and the other one, River, everyone knows. You can see the little house Nev built for his family still, near the river, across from Moffat's ranch. It is made of bottles mortared together with the necks all facing out. And when the wind blows through them, it moans like a sad, sad living thing.

Listen. You can hear it now. It's not coyotes; it's the wind in Nevlin's house. Please an old woman, do, and throw another stick or two of wood on that poor fire. It's cold tonight, inside and out.

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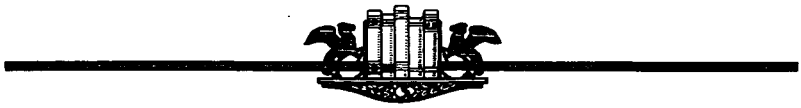

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Beyond This Dark House, by Guy Gavriel Kay, Penguin Canada, 2003, Cdn$20.

IT SHOULD come as no surprise to readers of Kay's splendid novels that his first collection of poetry resonates with marvelous use of language. Throughout the book, in poem after poem, lines leap from a verse to shiver their way into the reader, waking empathic feelings of melancholy and joy as memories from our own lives echo against those the poet offers to us.

Since we're all individuals, different elements will appeal to each of us. I have my own favorites.

In the first piece, a long poem about returning to one's hometown, the narrator is looking at houses and remembering their inhabitants, "...men and women mostly/dead now. Each address marks a grave."

In "Tintagel," he tells us of a woman who was dark haired and "...walked with a grace of shyness...."

In "After the Ball": "The city, in its own disarray/is also sleeping."

In "Goddess": "Words unspoken linger/longer than the spoken."

In "Reunion" the narrator searches for silence as "...we breathe/ a brittleness into each other/saying too many things...."

Kay writes about moments in his life — small stories with large internal impact — but he tells some grand tales, too, with poems from the viewpoint of Guinevere, Cain, and other figures from myth and folklore, named and unnamed. The voices change from modern conversational to a higher mythic language. What ties them all together is the singular vision of the poet, both secret and revealing.

This is a book that will certainly appeal to lovers of Kay's fiction, but I'd also recommend it to any reader with an interest in contemporary poetry.

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The Gryphon, by Neil Bantock, Chronicle Books, 2001, $19.95.

Alexandria, by Neil Bantock, Chronicle Books, 2002, $19.95.

The Morning Star, by Neil Bantock, Chronicle Books, 2003, $19.95.

If you like Bantock's earlier trilogy featuring Griffin and Sabine, you'll probably be equally taken with this new trilogy. It features a similar correspondence between lovers — this time a student in Paris named Isabella and an archaeologist named Matthew who is working on a dig in Egypt. Once again, readers get to peek in at a private exchange of postcards (the front appears on one page, the back on the other) and letters (which one removes from envelopes that are part of the book's pages).

Intruding on their correspondence are the characters of Griffin and Sabine from the first series, offering cryptic advice as the two young lovers have to deal with the villain Frolatti who plagued Griffin and Sabine during their own exchange of love letters and confidences in the first trilogy.

Bantock's artwork throughout is as charming as ever, which is the saving grace of what's really a repeat of an earlier hat trick. Because, while the incidents are new, the story, as was the story in the first trilogy, is rather slight, and this time the novelty of the postcards and letters that one can physically remove from the book is...well, no longer a novelty. So Bantock's new drawings and collages are the reason to pick up this series.

A word of warning: if you're unfamiliar with the first trilogy featuring Griffin and Sabine, you'll find this new trilogy incomprehensible, and would be wise to pick up the earlier books first.

Illumina: The Art of J. P. Targete, Paper Tiger, 2003, $29.95.

Simply put, Paper Tiger publishes some of the best collections of artwork — not just once in a while, but on a regular basis. I always find something to appreciate in them. It doesn't even matter if I don't particularly care for the artist in question, or it's someone with whom I'm unfamiliar (though when that happens, it's usually in regard to the name of the artist, rather than the work, for I always find book covers in these collections that I remember seeing on the stands, if not on my own shelves).

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What seduces me is the wealth of biographical material, the wide variety of art (from initial sketches to finished pieces), and the insights provided by the artist.

Now maybe it's because I've got a bit of a jones for the creative process — I'm fascinated by how people approach their particular means of creative expression. Or maybe it's because I've always been fascinated by how an artist can put a whole story in one picture, where it takes me the proverbial thousand words to do the same. Actually, a lot more than a thousand words, but that's neither here nor there.

The point is, when one of these Paper Tiger books shows up in my P.O. Box, I know I have a pleasurable evening of poring through it ahead of me. And *Illumina*, featuring the art of Jean-Pierre Targete, didn't let me down.

Jean Marie Ward provides a very readable and informed text, liberally sprinkled with quotes from the artist, and the art ranges from juvenilia (with the artist already showing promise) to the more mature paintings readers might recognize from the covers of books by Patricia Briggs (who provides a brief foreword), Roger Zelazny, Emma Bull, Lynn Abbey, Jane Yolen, Gregory Benford, and many others.

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The appendix will be of particular interest to new artists who want to see how it's done. It breaks down the cover for a Dragonstar player handbook, from thumbnails to finished painting, with Targete explaining the process every step of the way.

Naturally, different paintings will appeal to different people. My favorites were the photo-realistic *The Virgins of Paradise* for the novel by Barbara Wood, a portrait with mesmerizing eyes, and *The March*, a dramatic commentary on war that appears to be original to this volume (or at least there's no credit given for its use).

Considering the wide range of

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images — from high fantasy to high tech sf — there's something in here for every aficionado of genre art. The production values are top-notch: glossy, thick paper that lets the art shine.

And for those of you who feel that hardcovers are a bit much for your pocket book, Paper Tiger regularly reprints theirs in an oversized trade paperback format. For instance, Anne Sudworth's *Enchanted World* (reviewed in this column a while ago) arrived at the same time as the Targete book. It has the same wonderful stock and production value as the hardcover, but sells for only $21.95.

As I write this on a sweltering August day for you to read in January, I'd just like to mention my receipt of the special 60th anniversary issue of *Fantasy Commentator*, a journal specializing in the minutiae of our field. This issue, for example, explores the hidden history of the women who worked in the field between 1950-1960 (when it was still considered "boy's territory") and provides what appears to be a comprehensive bibliography of their contributions; part four of an ongoing series on Hugo Gernsback (you know, the guy whose name appears on that award); an index of reader's letters to *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* and other magazines; and much more, including reviews and poetry.

I mention all of this because while *Fantasy Commentator* was founded in 1943, it remains relevant, and is still being published. Few journals, not even the venerable one you hold in your hands as you read this, can say the same.

So happy 60th, *Fantasy Commentator*, and here's to your next sixty years!

For information on ordering copies, write to the editor at: A. Langley Searles, 48 Highland Circle, Bronxville, NY, 10708-5909.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Give Me Liberty, edited by Martin Harry Greenberg and Mark Tier, Baen, 2003, $7.99.

SINCE THE events of September 11, 2001, the words "freedom" and "liberty" have been tossed around as often (and with as much thought) as baseballs in the spring. The terrorists, we're told, attacked us because they hate "freedom." Lee Greenwood sings of America as a place where "at least I know I'm free" a half-dozen times a day on all the country stations. Freedom becomes one of those words that loses its meaning through overuse. Meanwhile the Attorney General proposes to safeguard our liberty by curtailing it, citizens lose their jobs for exercising freedom in their speech, and we've sent our military abroad to impose our style of free society on other nations — by force.

But what does this have to do with sf? Most people — those who don't read sf, and even some of those who do — think of it as escapist fluff, a literature that offers refuge from the problems of the outside world. But if you ask me, the best sf grapples with real-world issues as gamely as any other fiction, and not just on subjects of science and technology (where it outdoes any competitor). With its roots in the utopian fantasies of the early modern era, through the future-war novels of the nineteenth century, and down through the mess of the twentieth to our own day, sf has provided the best fictional tools for exploring matters of political and social philosophy. And sf's visions of the future have had a lot to say specifically on the subject of liberty, its proper limits (if any), and the social systems most conducive to its practice.

George Orwell's *1984* may be the single most influential work of political fiction ever, and it's no accident that Orwell — not a genre writer, though deeply influenced

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by the work of H. G. Wells — adopted the mode of science fiction for his cautionarily prophetic book. He could never have conjured the notions of Big Brother and doublethink in such chilling fashion within the confines of a conventional mimetic novel. Prophets speak of the future, and the language of the future is sf.

(Plume has just published a handsome new edition of *1984* for the centennial of Orwell's birth. Pick it up and see how potent it remains, even two decades after the passing of its fateful date.)

Orwell's novel essentially codified the dystopic view of the political future in sf. After *1984*, the repressive totalitarian state became a staple of sf, almost a cliché (though in genre sf, rebellious individuals more often manage to topple or at least escape the evil government). But the Orwellian nightmare-scenario is a warning, not a recommendation. It keeps our guard up against erosions of liberty, but it doesn't offer suggestions on how to increase the measure of freedom in our lives.

Ayn Rand's two sf novels, *Anthem* (1938) and *The Fountainhead* (1957), were not quite so influential, but they, along with Robert A. Heinlein's work (most notably *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* [1966]), helped refine sf's healthy skepticism about authority into something more powerful and prescriptive: libertarianism, a political philosophy which favors a minimal (or even nonexistent) government and a society based on unrestrained competition, in which voluntarily entered contracts are the foundation of all human interactions. Libertarianism is sometimes thought of as right-wing anarchism, due to its uncompromising dedication to free-enterprise economics.

Libertarianism has never dominated sf, but it has been a loud and consistent presence from the days of John W. Campbell onward, particularly in the person of Heinlein and his literary heirs. It's one of the longest-running and most insistent political themes in the field. Today, a small group of sf writers (led by L. Neil Smith) identify themselves explicitly as libertarian writers, and their fiction is often stiff with lengthy philosophical rant and cartoonishly simplistic scenarios in which incompetent bureaucrats get their deserved comeuppance. A few writers (notably Ken MacLeod and Vernor Vinge) present libertarian philosophy with greater subtlety and complexity — MacLeod's work is perhaps the most interesting

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overtly political sf being written today — but for the most part, libertarian attitudes simmer in the background of contemporary sf as an unexamined and dogmatic preference for private enterprise over state-sponsored programs. In Stephen Baxter's *Manifold* sequence, for example, and in John Varley's latest novel, *Red Thunder*, we're subjected to the tired fantasy of a single, amazingly capable entrepreneur doing what the government can't (or won't) — get us back into space — using only his ornery determination and personal fortune (plus, in Varley's case, the help of some plucky kids). The unlikelihood of these scenarios (no matter how accurate their science), and the refusal to acknowledge that, so far, it has only been government programs that have ever gotten us into space, give this old Heinleinian libertarianism a strained and desperate feel.

This is the sort of thing I expected to find when I opened *Give Me Liberty*, an anthology of stories dedicated to the premise of "doing away with government entirely." But I was surprised and pleased to discover that the stories gathered here — mostly from the fifties and sixties — reveal a distinctly different ethic from that in today's libertarian sf. There's no idolization of super-competent entrepreneurs to be found, and not much faith in capitalist economics either. In fact, some of these stories would warm any die-hard liberal's heart.

The book opens with Lloyd Biggle's "Monument" (1961), the story of an idyllic, low-tech indigenous society under threat of colonization and exploitation by an expanding high-tech civilization, and how the indigenes save themselves and their way of life from colonial ruin. Liberty is preserved — the liberty of the natives, anyway — but the forces that imperil freedom here are big business and private enterprise, not a rapacious or repressive government. Biggle's clear denunciations of unfettered development — and even of the profit motive itself — come almost as a shock. And Biggle's aborigines succeed not by eschewing government, but by using one of government's most controversial powers: taxation. It's a solution that would drive a devoted libertarian mad, but it's exactly the sort of approach that liberal campaigners for social justice might adopt.

Most of the stories in *Give Me Liberty* do not actually advocate the elimination of government as the path to greater freedom. Instead

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they focus on levelling the playing field. They identify inequalities of power as the engine of oppression, and in classic sf fashion they imagine a variety of gadgets to remedy the situation.

In "Gadget vs. Trend" (1962), Christopher Anvil proposes a "stasis device," a cheap and easy-to-use gizmo that renders whatever it's attached to virtually invulnerable and immovable. It gives citizens the power to resist government policies (and anything else) they don't like. "Historical Note" by Murray Leinster (1951) offers the personal flying machine as the answer. Armies dissolve, borders cannot hold, and no one can oppress anyone else when the victim can simply fly away. Leinster doesn't examine the complexities of his idea any more than Anvil does, and it's obvious neither gadget would ever produce the social effects the authors foresee, but these stories are not meant as serious proposals. They're fantasies, daydreams of how nice it would be if technology could simply sweep away all our problems.

The equalizing device in Frank Herbert's "Committee of the Whole" (1965) is a superpowerful laser gun that can be built out of stuff you might find lying around the house, or down at your neighborhood hardware store. (One of the prerequisites of these devices is that they're easily obtained by everyone — otherwise they would hardly be leveling the field.) With the secret of these guns out, the whole world will find itself in a state of mutually assured destruction writ small — down to the level of the individual person. Again, the plausibility of the device and its effects isn't the point — Herbert is presenting a political notion dressed up as a story. What's most striking here is the ideal proclaimed by the gun's inventor as he announces his discovery: He hopes that, under the threat of mutual extermination, "we might reach an understanding out of ultimate necessity — that each of us must cooperate in maintaining the dignity of all."

These stories propose a radical equalization in society, and the result (they hope) would be a culture of cooperation, not competition, with the aim of ensuring "the dignity of all." It is an anti-government vision insofar as the authors reject government as the means of achieving their reformed societies, but the foundation of them all — equalization of power — has far more in common with New Deal progressivism than with Rand's Objectivism.

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Two of the stories in *Give Me Liberty* tackle the problem of imagining how societies might actually function without government. Vernor Vinge's "The Ungoverned" (1985) is by far the most recent story in the book, so it's no surprise that its vision and sensibility are much closer to current libertarian principles. Vinge's story takes place in the world of his novels *The Peace War* and *Marooned in Realtime*. The U.S. has subdivided into a variety of smaller states and regions, including the "ungoverned" lands — much of the middle of the continent — where no formal government exists at all. Here all the functions of society take shape in voluntary contracts. Folks in Manhattan, Kansas can contract with Al's Protection Racket for basic police and security services, and with Midwest Jurisprudence or Justice, Inc. for legal coverage. Some go without contracts at all, and rely on their own resources (which usually take the form of massive arsenals). It all runs pretty smoothly, until the Republic of New Mexico — which has retained a representative democratic government much like our own — decides to invade the ungoverned lands. Without a government there's no army, just the private police operations who have contracted to provide protection, and the larger companies they have recontracted with for backup. It looks like the New Mexicans will just walk in and take over, but of course it's not that easy.

Eric Frank Russell presents a very different kind of ungoverned society in "And Then There Were None" (1951). On this distant colony planet, the people live by a kind of barter, in which the "seller" of a good or service plants an obligation (an "ob") on the "buyer." The ob can be repaid ("killed") directly, or through exchange with third, fourth, or fifth parties, until the circle closes with the original seller getting something he or she needs. Without money, it's hard for anyone to become wealthy (there's only so much you can do with a pile of unkilled obs), and citizens can only own what they actually use (no landlords, no franchisers, no real estate magnates), so there is very little economic inequality. There is no government, no police force, no law. Even the repayment of obs is optional — but of course one won't get far, once word spreads that obs won't be honored.

The arrival of an ambassador on a battleship from the expanding human Empire would appear to spell the end of this governmentless

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lifestyle, but as in the case of the New Mexican invasion, it's much harder than the ambassador thinks to bring these Gands (as they call themselves) into the fold. Instead, the ship starts losing crew, as they find the local conditions more appealing than life in the stiffly bureaucratic and economically stratified Empire.

Unlike in Vinge's story, there is no reliance on force among the Gands — even in resistance to the Imperial emissaries. The Gands instead have "the mightiest weapon ever thought up" — nonviolent disobedience. They call themselves Gands after Gandhi. Their planetary slogan is "Freedom — I Won't," and they exercise that power of refusal to flummox and annoy and eventually chase the Imperial dignitaries away, leaving hundreds of former crewmen and soldiers to their chosen life of Gandian liberty.

Russell's story has a jaunty humor and a supremely subversive message that makes it the most enjoyable and inspiring story in the book. But it's not quite possible to believe fully in either his or Vinge's governmentless society. They both admit (Russell explicitly) that their schemes could only work in relatively small communities, in which everyone knew everyone else and reputations for cheating could spread quickly. And even then they depend upon a rosier view of human nature than a study of history would tend to support — it's easy to imagine how either system could be corrupted by individuals or (especially) groups who didn't play by the rules. Most importantly, neither story addresses the crucial issue of the weak, the sick, the old, and the handicapped — the Achilles heel of every libertarian vision. What can these contract or obligation-based societies do with citizens who cannot generate as much as they need — who can never kill all the obs they would run up?

Libertarians too often resort to social Darwinism to dismiss the problem — the strong survive, the weak don't, *c'est la vie* — but neither Vinge nor Russell, to their credit, cops out that way. They just ignore the matter. We never see anyone old or disabled in either story, so we get no sense of how such citizens fare. And this leaves the freedom of these societies tasting a little thin. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt noted in his famous "Four Freedoms" speech, true individual freedom cannot be had without two key components: freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The gadget stories, with their emphasis

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on radical equality, seem to have something of this notion in mind, but none of the stories here manage to depict a credible society that would ensure such complete freedom to all its citizens.

Give Me Liberty offers an excellent assemblage of some rarely reprinted material that deserves to be better remembered. The editors might have balanced the book with a couple of stories from more recent years — maybe something from Paul McAuley, or Bruce Sterling, or Greg Egan, whose novel, *Schild's Ladder*, was nominated for the Libertarian Futurist Society's Prometheus Award for 2003 — but I can't think of any story from the past decade that addresses the issues of political freedom as directly as the selections here. *Give Me Liberty* is full of genuinely thought-provoking sf in the classic mode, doing what we badly need sf to do — challenging assumptions and exploring radical ideas, taking nothing for granted, daring to dream. And it provides something equally valuable. It reminds us of the shared roots of the liberal and libertarian traditions, which have over time become almost antithetical. Through these stories, we can see that devotees of freedom once recognized that all forms of coercion ultimately proceed from imbalances of power — economic, physical, emotional — and that the path to greater liberty lies through decreasing inequalities as much as possible. The difference then lay only in methods: liberal progressives saw government as a tool for achieving the goal, and libertarians saw government as one of the barriers to it. Over the second half of the twentieth century, libertarianism has abandoned the notion that liberty is intimately connected to mutual, cooperative, power-balanced relationships, while liberalism has seemingly forgotten that the goal is to increase individual freedom, not introduce a steady stream of new rules. The pleasure in *Give Me Liberty* lies in recognizing and celebrating the grand dream of true liberty upon which these two traditions are founded. The cause of freedom would be best served if liberals and libertarians could bridge their rift, and bring all lovers of liberty together again in common cause.

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Sheila Finch has two new books out now: Reading the Bones, *an expansion of her Lingster novella from our Jan. 1998 issue, and* Birds, *a new novel. Her latest story for us is a tale of clashing cultures with a very timely element to it.*

Confessional

By Sheila Finch

"FATHER O'CONNOR?"

Joe scanned JapanAir's NEXST-2 terminal in Honolulu International to locate the voice. He was stiff from the flight; being tall in a crowded supersonic turned the brief journey from L.A.X. into a nightmare.

"Father O'Connor!"

Jose Luis O'Connor, "Father Joe" to his parishioners in East Los Angeles, saw the stocky man holding the sign, his name crudely lettered and misspelled. He lifted his arm. "Over here."

The sign disappeared. A moment later, he watched the man pushing through the crowd. Arab, he noted. Everywhere these days, tourists making videos, vendors taking over the market the way other former enemies had done before them.

The Arab touched Joe's arm. "You come."

Three days ago he'd received an invitation from a Saudi he hadn't spoken to in twenty years, ticket included. He'd barely even thought of his former Berkeley roommate since before the Second Gulf War, but the

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urgent tone had been persuasive. They'd been friends once; maybe, in this new, saner world, they could be again. Plus he'd seen it as an opportunity to get away from the nightmares that had disturbed his sleep for the last six months.

The Arab grabbed Joe's carry-on bag. Outside, a dark blue Russian compact waited, its battery recharging. Joe lowered his head, bent his knees, and squeezed inside. The Arab tugged the cable free. The car careened across the tarmac, sliding under the wings of parked airliners, swerving around robot baggage trains. The driver pulled up beside an old two-seater seaplane, propellers turning. It took off before Joe had managed to fasten himself into the passenger seat. He stared down as land and then water rushed by below the wing.

"Mind telling me where we're going?" he shouted over the engine's roar.

The pilot ignored him. Maybe he didn't speak English.

After a while, Joe dozed fitfully. And immediately dreamed of Annie's hands, slim, long-fingered, with a thin silver ring on one middle finger —

The ring he'd had no right to give her.

He startled awake, nauseous from a sick conscience, and leaned his head against the window pane. Sin rode in the heart and accompanied the sinner to the ends of the Earth.

Islands punctuated the indigo ocean. He glanced at his watch, which he'd forgotten to reset, and made no sense of the displayed time. He could've sworn they were traveling in circles, the Sun now ahead, now behind the plane as if the pilot tried deliberately to confuse him, but directions meant nothing in this liquid wilderness.

They lost altitude, skimming low over creamy breakers, the seaplane's skis sending up rooster tails of bright water. He climbed out onto white sand, legs rubbery in the humid air. A young Polynesian in a white jumpsuit caught his arm, steadying him. The boy had a gun tucked into his belt.

Straight ahead, the compound looked like a set from a musical: tall palms leaning over thatched buildings, a tumble of flowers with electric colors and heavy scent. Farther down the beach, brown-skinned children splashed naked in gentle waves; they seemed to be all about the same age, perhaps three or four. A man lounged against a trunk, watching them. Sensing Joe's gaze, the man's eyes flicked briefly to him, then back to the

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children. There'd been something watchful in the glance, Joe thought. Or was that only a guilty conscience stabbing again?

"Does this place have a name?"

The boy shrugged and led him into a dim interior. Apparently none of his old roommate's employees spoke English, unlike their employer, whom he remembered using English with a non-native's exaggerated care.

If the building was Polynesian on the outside, it seemed all Arabian Nights inside: ceramic tiled floor with dark patterned rugs, low table of pale wood inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl. Sunlight filtered through a fretted screen. Something perverse about it, he decided, an exile's attempt to cling to the things of home.

His host sat in a wheelchair across the table, a white shawl draped over his knees. Joe remembered his roommate as being quite a bit shorter than himself, but the chair turned him into a dwarf.

"Welcome," the man said. "Forgive me if I do not rise to greet you."

The eldest son of a minor member of the Saudi royal family, Ahmad al-Something Khalid Muhammad bin Something — Joe had never tried to memorize all of it, even when they shared quarters — had left America, and Joe had entered the Church, before the war began.

"Good to see you again," Joe said, "I didn't know — "

The Saudi held up his hand and Joe fell silent while the boy set out two decanters, a brandy snifter, and a tall water glass, then withdrew.

A shimmer of strangeness passed over him. In the years since Cal, the former roommates had not only lost touch, they'd become enemies. Former enemies now; the war had been over almost ten years. Joe said, "Your invitation was quite a surprise."

His host inclined his head politely.

"Pretty place. I missed the name?"

The Saudi leaned forward and lifted one of the decanters, holding it out for Joe's inspection. Light sparkled in the cuts of high-quality crystal. "You were always fond of brandy. I hope this will not disappoint?"

He got the picture. They were going to play verbal chess, and it wasn't his move. Wealth always called the shots, nothing new here. He squinted at the decanter's silver tag. "Back then, Al, I was drinking Gallo."

His host poured cognac into Joe's snifter. "A careful host knows many things about his guest."

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Familiarities belonged to the past, he saw. Al-the-student had given way to Ahmad-the-careful-host. Another casualty of the war his side had won and Ahmad's had lost.

"My own tastes are constant." Ahmad picked up the second decanter. "Imported mineral water."

Irritated by the implied rebuke, he decided to press the point. "Seems like this island's closer to Tahiti than Hawaii. Does it have a name?"

For a second, Ahmad's mouth lifted in a smile; then his expression shut down again. "Let us, for the sake of discussion, call it Paradise."

In the silence that followed, Joe became aware of the soft plashing of a fountain in the courtyard outside the open window. A quick gush of children's voices, just as quickly vanished.

"Certainly beautiful enough to be Paradise," he agreed. "But I seem to remember your father wanted you to come back to Riyadh when you left Berkeley."

"I do not share my father's politics."

Joe studied his host. Most of the Muslim World climbed laboriously toward democracy since losing the war. Middle Eastern economies were on the upswing, and most Muslim women went without veils, drove cars, and held jobs, even in Saudi Arabia. The peace was fragile but seemed to be holding. The West made a benevolent victor; not loved — what victor ever was? — yet accepted, as far as he was aware.

Tired of the waiting game, he said, "I can't help wondering why you sent for me."

Ahmad held up a hand. "All in good time. You were always too impulsive."

They'd made odd roommates: Joe, liberal and hotheaded like his IRA father; Ahmad the conservative scientist, uninterested in student activism or world politics. At night, they'd argued everything from religion to American pop culture. Joe was eloquent in defense of his causes; Ahmad expressed revulsion at American secularism. Joe remembered teasing Ahmad for hypocrisy — the Saudi had a taste for Hollywood SciFi. In turn, Ahmad derided Joe's second-hand revolutionary zeal. Trained to debate by Jesuits in high school, Joe had won all the arguments.

"I have never forgotten our youthful discussions." Ahmad refilled his guest's glass.

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Joe was suddenly uncomfortable to have that part of their past brought up. He'd been something of an insufferable bastard in those days, the Irish in him, as his Mexican mother called it. She'd despised the senior O' Connor's espousal of violence for political ends, a commitment that led to his death by a British bullet.

"These days, I listen to other people's problems and opinions," he said. "I don't push mine on them."

Ahmad nodded. "I have followed your career from a distance."

And just how did Ahmad manage to do that? Not as if the life of an obscure parish priest in East L.A. made the news. "Couldn't have found much of interest."

"You are being considered for a bishopric."

He hadn't even confided that possibility to his mother. In his mind he heard Annie's laughter, her phony Irish accent teasing him: "*Himself would like to be pope someday, is it?*"

"Come." Ahmad set his water glass down. "I wish to show you something."

He followed Ahmad's wheelchair, wondering what had put his old friend in it; the man's thin hands turning the wheels seemed bloodless. They passed through a doorway to a courtyard, the bead curtain clicking behind them. Outside, the vibrant perfume of flowers overloaded his senses, and a sudden blaze of Sun turned a fountain's spray into a shower of diamonds. He heard the distant susurration of waves.

"What do people do for a living here?"

"They fish," Ahmad said. "Or act as extras when film crews come on location. Our islanders have become quite addicted to Hollywood money."

He wasn't surprised Ahmad enjoyed rubbing shoulders with the Hollywood crowd. Then he thought of Annie again. She worked occasionally as an extra. Black-haired Annie, her eyes the soft gray of moss, she had a kind of elfin beauty that might've brought success on the screen someday, but her passions lay elsewhere. He remembered her vividly, visiting the cathedral under construction, laughing as he purchased the silver ring from a street vendor —

He forced himself to shut her out of his mind. "And yourself? What do you do?"

In answer, Ahmad indicated the way through another arch to a second

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courtyard patterned with the lacy shade of palms. A jungle gym that looked as if it had been ordered from a Sears catalog stood in the center. An Arab guard in a shapeless tunic over American jeans slouched against the wall of a whitewashed building. Room under that loose cloth to hide an automatic, Joe thought, remembering the Polynesian boy who'd met him on the beach, but these days it was more likely to be a laptop. The guard held the door open for Ahmad to roll through.

Inside, it was cool and dim. The babble of children's voices echoed, and he glimpsed shadowy forms.

Ahmad stopped, breathing heavily. "My life's work."

Joe saw a dozen little girls no more than four years old, ponytails tied with bright ribbons. Three sat on a mat where a cross-legged female teacher read from a picture book; others played computer games. One child fed carrots to a guinea pig; another painted at an easel. The children wore shorts with pastel T-shirts. Most of them were obviously Pacific Islanders with dark skin and hair, but several were blondes.

"You're running a school?" It seemed an oddly small project for a man as intense as Ahmad to call his life's work.

"Do you find them pretty?" Ahmad asked, "Like small angels."

"Beautiful kids," he agreed. "Any of them your own?"

"Like you, I have no children, but for another reason. These children have no parents. I educate them here in this kindergarten. You took me to visit its model in Oakland."

That school once stood in a run-down neighborhood where Joe had volunteered to serve the homeless and their ragged kids. Ahmad hadn't been impressed by that kindergarten, he remembered, but here its clone bloomed in the South Pacific. The blondes fascinated him; obviously Ahmad didn't confine his philanthropy to the native-born.

Ahmad clapped his hands. "I have brought you a visitor."

A dozen little faces turned toward Joe. "Good afternoon, sir!" the children chorused in unaccented English.

Something jarred about that. He would've expected Arabic, or at least the local tongue, not English, which Ahmad himself spoke so carefully.

Ahmad gestured to the teacher, a slim woman with a short bob of dark hair, wearing a white silk jumpsuit like the Polynesian servant, though the way it fitted suggested a more prestigious designer.

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"My wife completed her doctorate in cellular biology at Johns Hopkins."

The woman gazed at Joe without smiling, and he knew instinctively she didn't approve of the invitation or maybe the guest. He wondered again why Ahmad had brought him here.

The Sun hesitated on top of the wall as they came out, creating a dazzle of crimson fire in the fountain's spray, then quickly disappeared.

Joe wiped sweat off his face. "A kindergarten's a worthy philanthropy, but why here in Polynesia? The war left enough orphans in the Middle East — "

"Sleep now," Ahmad said. "Tomorrow will be time to talk."

As if he'd been waiting for this cue, the Polynesian boy appeared and indicated Joe should follow.

The room he entered was furnished western-style, curtained and dim. Jet lag caught up with him. He stripped off his clothes and slumped on the bed.

THE SOUND of children's voices penetrated his sleep and he dreamed: *A field green with spring grass — daisies — children's hands speckled with blood —*

He sat up, disoriented. The Sun seemed to have reversed itself, hovering in the sky where it had been when the seaplane landed. White curtains fluttered in the breeze. He glanced out. The buildings of the compound were arranged around a series of palm-shaded courtyards; two blonde little girls skipped rope in this one, their voices a pure, high singsong. Bright birds clattered about their heads. The game ended as he watched, and the children moved arm-in-arm through an archway out of sight.

A basin and a jug of water waited on a low table for him to refresh himself. He squinted at his watch. Whatever the local time might be, he realized he'd slept almost twenty hours. He stripped and splashed water on his face and torso.

His host was conferring with the sour-faced Arab guard when Joe rejoined him. The man went away.

"I hope you slept well, Joe?"

"Very well, thanks. I feel much better." Ahmad, he thought, looked

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as if he hadn't slept for days. Again, he wanted to ask what had happened to him but didn't feel comfortable enough to do so.

"Then we shall eat."

Ahmad clapped his hands, then gestured him to a cushion before a table inlaid with silver and brass and rolled his chair opposite. Ahmad's wife didn't join them. Joe wondered about that — two graduates of American universities still following the customs of desert nomads? A native servant poured flower-scented water over their fingers into a silver basin, then held out a hand towel. The mix of Arab and Polynesian, desert and Pacific, was intoxicating.

"You are wondering why I invited you to visit," Ahmad said. "I shall tell you. But first I wish to discuss religion."

"You paid a lot for a discussion you could've had with any Christian in the world!"

"Not any Christian. A Roman Catholic priest. You."

Thin lentil soup with lemon slices arrived in delicate porcelain bowls. Joe said grace silently and picked up his spoon. The long years on his knees had taught him patience.

"Enjoy the meal," Ahmad said pleasantly. "I remember you liked to eat as well as argue."

"You've got a good memory."

"It is difficult to forget when one has been defeated in every argument by a superior debater."

"It wasn't serious, Ahmad."

The Saudi smiled, white teeth flashing in candlelight, and held up his hand. "A joke, my friend."

"*You think it a joke?*" Ahmad's angry voice said in his memory. They'd been passing a Campus Crusade rally at Berkeley, the speaker exhorting a crowd of students in turbans and kaffiyehs to witness for Christ.

"*All religions seek converts, Al,*" he'd said, laughing. "*It's no big deal. See? They're handing out free coffee and sandwiches as bribes!*"

But Ahmad had replied, "*It is an insult.*"

The servant returned to clear away the soup bowls — Ahmad had scarcely touched his — then served lamb and rice with rich odors of garlic and cinnamon. Was that what this invitation was all about, a chance for

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another debate about religion, this time one Ahmad thought he could win? It seemed a terrible waste of money, but his host obviously wasn't lacking in wealth. They ate in silence, Ahmad only picking at his plate. The man would've done better to send the plane ticket to an American doctor instead of a priest, Joe thought.

The meal over, coffee came, thick and sweet in tiny porcelain cups. He thought of Ahmad in a Cal sweatshirt over crisp jeans, teaching him to brew coffee Middle-Eastern style on a hotplate in their room, one of the few moments when they'd got along without argument. Maybe they hadn't been such good friends after all.

Ahmad offered cigarettes in black paper, which Joe declined.

Joe leaned forward. "Maybe we should have that discussion now?"

"I wish to speak of the soul," Ahmad said.

He'd been bracing himself for a repeat of one of their old arguments about the virtues of Islam and the sins of Christianity, or perhaps the venality of Judaism. This sounded more like the concern of a man sensing death's approach.

"Surprised, Joe? Is not your faith much concerned with the fate of the immortal soul?"

The question was ingenuous; he had the sudden sensation of walking through a minefield. "And yours isn't?"

"On the contrary, as you well know."

The servant came and lit more candles then left. In the shadows, Ahmad's expression was hidden from him. Whatever lay behind this, he might as well go along with it for the moment.

"One may devoutly follow one's understanding of the Prophet's words — blessed be his name!" Ahmad said. "But perhaps Allah does not will all that one performs in his name."

He shook his head, then regretted it as a headache pulsed warning. "If Allah's the same God we all worship, Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike — "

"We will confine our discussion to the teachings of Rome."

There was something here that alarmed, as if his toe brushed against a dark metal fin in the sand, something bleak and ominous left over from hostilities he'd forgotten or never really understood.

Ahmad stubbed out the cigarette; smoke lingered over his head in a

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faintly luminous halo. "Speak to me of your Catholic sacrament of absolution."

"First I'd like to know the point of this discussion."

"Do not you Romans believe that a man can unburden himself of his sins at the end, no matter how heinous, and his God will forgive?"

The Church taught this was true, though he had private doubts. God was slow to send the comfort of forgiveness he craved for his own sin of omission. It would be such a little thing for the Almighty to grant: A night without the dreams — Annie's slender hands clasped in prayer in the confessional. Her brittle laughter. The children's blood.

After a moment he said, "If the man makes a proper act of confession and contrition, he'll receive absolution." But he didn't believe it for himself.

Ahmad held up a hand; the sleeve of his robe slid back, revealing the sparkle of a diamond-studded Rolex. "Then this priest must hear many harrowing tales of adultery and theft, perhaps even murder undiscovered. Why does he not go to the police with these tales?"

He stared at Ahmad's face in the candlelight. "A priest never reveals what's told in the sanctity of the confessional."

And carried the guilt with him to his grave, he thought. No absolution for those who through inaction allowed His little ones to come to harm. Even if action would've required breaking the seal of the confessional. Even if it was an accidental consequence. God would never forgive.

"What if the contrite one reports what is yet to occur? Surely this priest would wish to prevent the sin?"

Sweat started down his neck. He swabbed it ineffectually with a linen napkin. Ahmad couldn't know — it wasn't possible.

"Would the priest then break this holy law and reveal the confession to the police?"

Memory overwhelmed him: Annie on her knees, revealing plans. "*They're committing a great wrong, Father Joe. They must be stopped!*" She'd given him time and place, but he hadn't wanted to believe Annie capable of such evil — Annie of the gray eyes and slender hands. Maybe it was his own guilty desire? Maybe he'd dreamed of his IRA father and secretly sympathized? Then — a morning in early spring, dew still on the grass — a little girl and her small brother, intent on who knew what

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childish pursuit, climbing under the construction site tape, wandering at the last minute into the tiny scrap of park in East L.A. condemned to become another strip mall. They were blown up with the developer's parked bulldozers and earth-graders Annie hated so much.

He could've prevented their suffering. He'd been afraid to act and afraid to prevent others from acting, betrayed by his forbidden love. The children would haunt his dreams forever. And God would never forgive him.

Yet hadn't he been required by his vows to conceal the secrets of the confessional? More so those sins only contemplated, not yet committed? No sane person would've believed Annie meant to carry it out or had the ability! He'd withheld absolution, but she hadn't wanted it, he saw that now. She'd been toying with him. He didn't know why, unless it was to tempt him back to his activist past. Dear God! He'd even given her a ring — a "friendship ring" he'd called it — and she'd laughed at him that day on the cathedral's steps. She'd known her plans were safe with him; she knew his secret lust and despised him for it.

He propped elbows on knees and cradled his pounding head. He'd kept the vow of celibacy made when he entered the priesthood, but God had tempted him with an ecoterrorist whose face heated his blood and speeded his heart. He'd failed the test, and God's little ones had died. There was no absolution for him.

"There are some in this world who nurse hatred like a child at the breast," Ahmad said softly. "My father is one. Like him, they seek to avenge our loss of honor. Not overtly, for we do not have the power."

He thought of his own father's never-ending war. "Terror never succeeds in the long run."

Ahmad made a dismissive gesture. "It is sinful to use what Allah creates for destruction. I have told my father this."

The Polynesian boy slid quietly into the room, lit more tapers, then rearranged the white shawl over the Saudi's legs and withdrew. Buying time, Joe lifted the coffee cup and thought of Annie. She'd been gone for several weeks on location before that confession, an absence he'd been glad of even as he despaired. Then she'd come back, tanned and more lovely than ever to his sinful eyes. He remembered her expressive hands folded in prayer, beguiling him into sin. For sin was still sin even when only contemplated, and a priest had no excuse.

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"I do not have much time left," Ahmad said. "I am dying."

He looked at the Saudi's ravaged face. "I'm sorry — "

Ahmad waved his sympathy away. "The devout Muslim believes the soul is a gift from Allah and belongs to Allah. Man must not wantonly destroy what Allah creates. But perhaps you are aware that we in the Arab world were once great scientists?"

He shook his head, unable to follow the convoluted thread of the Saudi's conversation. "We owe a debt to your early astronomers and physicians, if that's what you mean."

"I am honored you remember this. Knowledge of the biology of the cell brings great possibilities. My wife has pursued one of these possibilities for the last ten years. What did you think of our little clones?"

He blinked. "I don't understand...."

"You admired my pretty orphans. Did you not notice a certain similarity?"

He stared at Ahmad. "You're telling me those kids were clones?"

"Why are you surprised? American farmers clone their best stock, and your citizens are free to clone beloved pets. It is only human research that is banned to Western scientists."

Impossible, surely? The little girls had looked remarkably homogenous, now that he thought about it, as far as his cognac-clouded and sleep-deprived vision could tell. But clones?

"The blond ones?"

"A trivial task to change the DNA of hair color."

After the cloning horrors of '03 and '04, and the subsequent banning at the Geneva conference in '05, he'd thought even the most extreme radicals had given up any idea of cloning humans.

"Hard to believe, Ahmad!"

Ahmad gazed at him for a moment, then took out a small phone and spoke rapidly in Arabic. A few seconds passed, then the bead curtain swung, and the Arab guard he'd seen earlier entered with two tiny girls, one blond, one brunette. The children were dressed for bed in identical cotton nightshirts embroidered with flowers at the neck; the dark-haired child carried a white puppy with a pug face. Except for the hair, they might've been identical twins: same almond-shaped eyes, same button nose, same sprinkling of amber freckles across tanned cheeks. They

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shuffled their bare feet, looking bashful. His mother would've adopted them immediately as the grandkids he'd never give her.

"Are you satisfied?" Ahmad put out a hand and ruffled the nearest child's hair, his hand then slipping down to pet the puppy in the same careless manner.

Chilled, Joe said nothing.

"Do you believe a clone has a soul?"

The question blew away the last vestige of his tiredness. As a priest, he couldn't answer Ahmad's question. Rome hadn't issued a ruling on the presence of an immortal soul in human clones. But surely, even a clone must have a soul in a world ruled by a God of love.

Ahmad didn't wait for his answer. "Allah creates no soul in a body made by man. The clone is like a beast of burden. Do you consider a camel has a soul?"

"The Qu'ran says this?"

"How should the Prophet speak of things not dreamed of in his day?" Ahmad's tone was contemptuous of the infidel's ignorance.

"But why've you done this, Ahmad?"

"I will tell you. I know you will not betray me."

His heart hammered at his ribs. "*I know you won't betray me, Father Joe,*" Annie's voice said in his memory, and he heard again her teasing laughter, felt her warm breath caress his cheek through the confessional's screen, smelled the musky incense of her hair. Sweat ran down his neck under the clerical collar.

"Unlike my father, I am not without principle," Ahmad said. "My wife brought these clones into being, and I train them, for a purpose to which I would not commit those with souls. Consider these little ones." Ahmad tilted the chin of the blond child. "How innocent their faces! Who could deny them access anywhere? When they are ready, my pretty beasts of burden will go unsuspected into your world to do work that would be evil to give to those whom Allah creates."

Ahmad gestured and the sullen guard ushered the children and the puppy out of the room.

He shook his head. "The war's over, Ahmad. We've made peace."

"I have not made peace." The Saudi's frail hands gripped the armrests of his chair.

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Was this to be like his father's war in Ireland, never settled, never won? "For God's sake — to use such little children — as what? Suicide bombers?"

"Clones. I am not as sentimental as you." Ahmad took a cigarette from an inlaid box on the low table and lit it, his movements casual as if they discussed the weather or the latest cricket score between Australia and Afghanistan.

"But this is outrageous!"

"Is it?" Ahmad shrugged. "Hollywood long ago showed the uses to which constructed humans will be put. Do you not remember that old movie, *Attack of the Clones*?"

Bile rose into his throat, scalding him. He found no easy answer for Ahmad.

"I will pick my targets carefully when I am ready, Joe. Some symbols are more powerful than others. You told me once how your father understood the importance of symbolism."

"*Your own father would've joined us if he'd lived,*" Annie'd said. He rubbed his temples.

"You must not think that I have gone to all this trouble producing clones only for minor fireworks displays." Ahmad paused, gazing at Joe as if he expected him to grasp the unspoken.

He didn't know what was possible in the industrialized west, let alone on an island in the South Pacific. Yet he could guess. "You're not talking — dirty bombs?"

Ahmad smiled. "Cesium-137 is not hard to acquire. Hospitals and labs are careless with its disposal."

Anger flooded through him and he stood. "Why're you telling me this? I'm not your priest and I'm not a fool."

"You aspired to revolution once. Do you remember how you chided me for not sharing your passion? How you accused me of hypocrisy? How you challenged my honor as a man of principle?" Ahmad leaned forward and stubbed out the cigarette.

"We were young in those days — bullheaded, arrogant — "

"I allowed the insults to pass unmarked. You did not understand that I had larger plans. Even then, the sickness of your world might have corrupted me, made me forget what I had sworn to do. But then there was war in the Middle East and many things changed."

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Saudi Arabia had remained neutral at first, he remembered, even when other Arab countries joined the war against the West. But eventually it too had taken sides. "You fought for Saddam Hussein?"

"I did not have the chance." Ahmad splayed the fingers of one hand over his crotch. "American bombs took away the use of my legs and my manhood both."

"Look, I'm deeply sorry for what happened to you. And I guess I can understand your desire for revenge — "

"You gave up the fruit of your seed willingly. Mine was taken from me."

"You can't expect me not to report what you've told me."

"But I do, Joe. I do." Ahmad's eyes glittered in the candlelight. "I know you very well. You understand the necessity for the death of innocents. You will keep silent about what has been confessed. It is a very good talent for one who would become a bishop!"

THERE WAS LITTLE rest for him on the supersonic's flight from Honolulu. His mind raced over the possibilities. He'd been set up, but for what? Nerves rubbed raw, he scanned each passenger who boarded, startled at each wail of a baby far back in tourist class, almost cried out when a flight attendant escorted an unaccompanied child to a seat nearby — a boy of about eleven or twelve.

Ahmad didn't intend to waste his work blowing up airliners. That was too simple. The Saudi would aim for bigger symbols to achieve his aims. And pretty little girls could slip in unsuspected where no plane could get past the security nets any more.

He rubbed his temples in frustration. Ahmad had intended to wound, to burden him with unholy knowledge. To make him suffer as Ahmad had suffered.

Where, on location, had Annie been while she planned her act of ecoterrorism? She'd come back deeply tanned in the middle of winter. She'd never told him the source of her funding, who paid for or supplied the explosives. Had his own foolish yearning for her been payment to a terrorist cell? Had she sold him out to Ahmad? A friendship ring for enough pieces of silver to blow up a small construction project — a trivial

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target to Ahmad. But Ahmad would know about the two children who'd been killed. He covered his eyes with his hands in shame.

He'd been invited to "Paradise" — the name was a cruel joke — only to see how far from entering Heaven's gate he was in reality. It was a joke in bad taste. Nothing more.

He hadn't believed Annie capable of evil either.

He took the coffee the attendant offered, his hand jittering, and spilled it on his lap. The hot liquid reached down through cloth and scalded his flesh, jerking him out of his recitation of misery.

There had to be something he could do. He couldn't make the same mistake twice. A dozen pretty little faces rose in his mind. Too young yet, thank God! to carry out their creator's deadly plan. Ahmad judged him to be the hypocrite, the coward who wouldn't risk his own future. The man wanted him to suffer a long time, waiting, dreading.

This time he had to go to the authorities and tell them what he knew.

And in return Ahmad would reveal Joe's own secret sin and jeopardize his budding career.

He set the coffee down on the seatback table. Just what did he know anyway? Clones. Frankenstein's little monsters constructed in a tropical workshop. Who'd believe a bizarre story like that? How could he even be certain they were clones? Little kids dressed identically looked similar at that age. He had no proof. He didn't know what was planned or when or where it might take place. He didn't know where to tell them to search. Somewhere in the South Pacific. But scores of palm-covered islands and atolls dotted the vast wilderness of the Pacific Ocean.

Ahmad had borne a grudge all these years against his former roommate. Now he exacted revenge, telling a "secret" that Joe would never know was true or false. Ahmad knew about Joe's father; this was a hoax Joe would be sure to fall for. Ahmad would be sitting there now, smoking his black cigarette and laughing. As Annie had laughed. Ahmad could die in peace, knowing he'd ruined Joe's peace of mind. Ahmad had won the last argument.

Somewhere over the Pacific, he finally slept, waking with a start an hour later when the captain announced the beginning of descent into L.A.X.

* * *

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On a Sunday, two months after his return to the rectory in East L.A., he found the heavy cream-colored envelope from the bishop which had been hand-delivered while he was celebrating early mass; his housekeeper left it prominently displayed on his desk. He tore it open. The cathedral, third in L.A.'s history, was to be formally dedicated at noon today, and the cardinal would officiate. Joe was already planning to attend. Afterward, the letter said, his superior invited him to stay for lunch, an unusual honor for a lowly parish priest. It hinted of the bishop's high regard for this priest's future.

Leaving a note for the assistant to cover the rest of the day, he showered and changed into his best black suit. Then he took the ancient Ford sedan that had belonged to the parish since '09 and drove west across the city. The freeway was empty in both directions, the crowded maglev flashing past down the middle.

The unreality of the discussion with Ahmad had faded like a bad dream, and he hadn't seen Annie since his return. He hoped she'd taken her revolution elsewhere. He looked out at the city with affection; it had been extensively rebuilt after the pounding it had taken in the war. The spring day was warm, the air clear and scented with orange, everything gilded in the Southern California light.

The cathedral, Nuestra Señora Reina de Los Angeles, came into view, a white phoenix rising from the bomb damage, more magnificent than ever. He was touched to see the human trace: a workman racing to finish before the ceremony had left a jacket dangling from a drainpipe high up on the stone. The bishop's residence was across a wide lawn. He parked the battered Ford.

A crowd of late worshipers hurried up the steps to the cathedral's front doors. The cardinal and the bishop would be already inside, the mayor and members of the city council, perhaps even the governor and assorted politicians down from Sacramento for the occasion. Sunlight catching the lenses of a tri-vee cam filming for the evening broadcast flashed at him. Most of the crowd was inside already as he approached the steps. Just ahead, two nuns herded a line of children in crisp white uniforms through the smaller door set in the massive one. The last one disappeared inside, and the door closed, leaving him alone.

He paused at the top of the steps listening to a mockingbird's hymn,

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suddenly reluctant to enter the cathedral. He turned his gaze inward, seeking the source of this vague unease. Was he afraid he didn't have it in him to be bishop someday? Clearly that wasn't it; he looked forward to the elevation. What, then?

In the distance, he saw two figures hurrying through the old churchyard, the taller one a blur of blue, the small one a flash of white. Some of the graves and massive stone-walled crypts in that yard were more than two hundred years old, whole families buried side by side when the original cathedral and the city were young.

And there he found the knot of guilt that wouldn't let him go through the doors into God's house. Two children lay in their graves because of him, and he couldn't bring them back if he rose to become pope himself.

In that crystal moment, he came to a decision. He would make his confession to the bishop about his lust for Annie and its bloody consequences, and he'd ask for absolution. His superior, old and wise in the frailties of flesh, would understand. Yet he didn't deserve ever to be a bishop himself; he would respectfully decline the honor when it came. He couldn't undo the evils of the past, but he had years left in which to do good work in his parish as penance. Perhaps in time he'd earn forgiveness.

For some people, like his father and Ahmad, the war — any war — would never be over till they had their own way. And then others would rise up in turn and make war on them. God, it seemed, declined to take sides. He'd been pursuing the wrong goal, praying the memories of Annie and the dead children would go away. The solution for him was never to forget.

"Father!"

He dragged himself up from the black hole he'd plunged into and found an elderly Los Angeles cop puffing his way up the stone steps.

"This one got separated from the sisters. Will you take her?"

The cop pushed a little girl toward him. No more than four at the most, she wore a white dress with pleated skirt; her cheeks were lightly sprinkled with freckles and her blond hair was tied in ringlets with blue ribbon.

Looking at her, Joe felt the weather change.

"Thanks!" The cop grinned and was gone, taking the steps down two at a time.

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Behind Joe, the small door set into the large one squealed on its hinges and a nun peered out. Seeing the child, she stretched out a hand.

"I'll take her, Father," she whispered.

The child turned to go with the nun. He saw the bulge by her rib cage over the heart, and his own heart seemed to leap into his throat making speech impossible. This was Ahmad's revenge.

No. He recognized God's answer. Not the passive forgiveness he'd prayed for. On the other side of those golden doors were people, great or insignificant, who deserved to live. Out here there was only a child who was already doomed, carrying the seeds of destruction and suffering. And a priest with too much death on his conscience.

Ahmad had misjudged him. This time he would act.

He grabbed the child away from the startled nun, clutching her against him, and leaped for the steps. He couldn't know what weapon he was dealing with or how much time he had. All he could do was put as much space as possible between the child and the crowded cathedral.

And hope that if she was laced with contagion, it would not spread far when the bomb went off.

He missed the top step, stumbled, caught himself, stumbled again and this time bumped down the entire flight on one hand and both knees. The little girl, hugged close in his other arm, whimpered. Panting, ignoring the shriek of bruised muscles and torn skin, he got up and raced toward the cemetery. Now his legs gave way and he fell behind weathered headstones and across the open doorway of a stone crypt, the child under him.

For a moment, he lay gasping, his vision blurred. Then he forced himself up onto hands and knees again and crept further into the shelter of thick walls. Outside the crypt, dark storm clouds seemed to have rolled across the Sun.

Just one, he thought, one of twelve aimed at unknown targets. But this one was his.

The child put up a finger and touched his cheek, and he looked down at her in the remaining light. Her face was streaked with tears, but she smiled at him.

Ahmad was wrong about that too. The child's soul shone in that smile like an angel holding open the gate.

He smiled back in a sudden lightning flash. ✠

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George Tucker grew up in the Arkansas Ozarks, where he learned to dowse for water and the right way to kill a chicken. In college, he decided to be a writer, which led him to purchase several black turtlenecks and hang around in coffee shops. This skillset led him to South Florida, where, between writing, reading, and training his red-tick hound Izzy, he barely has time to squeeze in job-hunting. His short-story "DragonDrop" won the 2002 Writer's Digest prize for genre fiction.

Gordon R. Dickson claimed many years ago that "Computers Don't Argue." Mr. Tucker's brief look at justice in the electronic age doesn't quite contend that computers do *argue, but it might leave one wondering just what happened to Justice 1.0...*

Welcome to Justice 2.0

By George Tucker

ELCOME TO MS JUSTICE 2.0!

Docket # 91-1241 filed 8 August 2015

In the matter of

United States of America, Plaintiff-Appellee,

vs.

Alan Peabody, Defendant-Appellant.

How do you plead? (G=guilty, N=not guilty, press F9 for nolo contendore)

>N

Please upload your defense:.

>C:\My Programs\Legal\Lotus Council\

Upload complete!

Please wait for a deliberation... ... ...Complete! (deliberation took 0.11 seconds)

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We're sorry, you have been found Guilty As Charged. You have been sentenced to three years in a federal penitentiary.

Would you like to appeal?

>Y

Appeal granted!

Would you like to change your plea?

>N

Please upload your defense:

>C:\My Programs\Legal\Lotus Council\BetaTest\

Upload complete!

Please wait for a deliberation... ... ...Complete! (deliberation took 0.06 seconds)

We're sorry, Mr. Peacock, your conviction has been Upheld.

Your sentence will remain unchanged.

>HELP

Would you like to report a technical issue?

>Y

Reviewing session transcript... ... ...Complete!

We're sorry, no technical issues detected. If you feel this system is in error, please e-mail technical support at techhelp@justice.com

We take technical issues very seriously, and strive to serve each request in a prompt and efficient manner. Please remember to include your name, contact information, computer system, brand and version number of your legal software, case number, and any other information you feel is pertinent to your case. We review each report on a first-come, first-serve basis, and attempt to respond within seven weeks.

>Shift+F5

Welcome to the Plea Bargaining Wizard! This wizard assists your plea bargaining process.

Please upload your counsel software:

>C:\My Programs\Legal\Mac\EasyTime\

Upload complete!

Please wait for a deliberation... ... ...

We're sorry, but you have chosen invalid software, or your file is corrupt.

Please upload your counsel software:

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>C:\My Programs\Legal\Shareware\Mercy\

(((Mercy! ver. 5.09.155)))

(((Would you like (R)estrained negotiation, (N)ormal negotiation, or (A)ggressive negotiation?)))

>A

(((Software engaged. Good luck.)))

(((While you're waiting.... Our software has helped thousands get off the hook! Without your help, this programming could not continue. Please consider sending $10 for every year shaved off your sentence to mercy@mercy.com Visa and MasterCard accepted.)))

Please wait for negotiation... ... ...Complete! (negotiation took 0.73 seconds)

Your sentence has been successfully negotiated to: two years parole and time served.

Is this satisfactory?

>Y

>EXIT

Returning to Justice...

Congratulations on your successful plea bargain! Your sentence begins effective immediately.

Do you have any other pending cases?

>N

Thanks for using MS Justice. Be good.

>

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Through the 1980s, Michael Shea provided us with a supply of powerful stories, including several classics of the horror genre such as "Uncle Tuggs" and "The Autopsy." During the 1990s, he published occasional short stories but focused primarily on his novels of Nifft the Lean, specifically The Mines of Behemoth *and* The A'Rak. *(You can see his full bibliography on his Website at* www.michaelsheaauthor.com.*) Now we're in a new century and Mr. Shea has brought us a new story, a very unusual contemporary tale that delves a bit into the metaphysical side of life.*

The Growlimb

By Michael Shea

IN THE OFFICES OF HUMANITY Incorporated, Marjorie, Program Director of Different Path, had her own cubicle. From her desk she could look across the floor directly into the corner nook — not a cubicle really, with only a standing screen to half-partition it off — where Carl Larken had his desk.

Larken was on the phone, his chair tilted back, his outthrust feet toed under his desktop, his body poised almost horizontal to the floor. In cut-offs and worn Nikes, a brambly gray beard and raked-back gray locks tendrilled on his neck, the man's toughness showed. A lean and sun-burned man in his fifties.

Marjorie tried to decide why Larken stood out so. It wasn't his dress. Humanity Inc. was a sizable human services nonprofit, and didn't insist on office drag — most of its program managers had social activist backgrounds and liberal views. What nagged at her was the man's... tautness. He was a very personable, articulate guy, sociable on demand, but he had an agenda, an undistracted inwardness. He could be talking to you about your program, deep in the details of a write-up with you,

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showing perfect grasp and sensitive awareness, and you would suddenly know he wasn't really there, was working his tongue and his face like a puppet, flawlessly managing his half of the exchange, light-years away in his mind. Over the months, she had formed the whimsical but persistent notion that Carl Larken was insane.

She recognized that this secret alienation she saw in him could be from her own lack of real involvement in her work. She was rich. Her parents owned a flourishing winery. After her B.A. in Fine Arts, a sense of aimlessness had overtaken her. This job was her Term of Involvement with Reality, an immersion in the hard and hurting strata of the world. Different Path was a criminal justice diversionary program, counseling and community services for the drug-riddled, the sick and the desperate. She worked it, pulled her Beemer into the lot at eight sharp, waded into her case files, made her house calls, networked with the D.A.'s office — the whole nine yards. But ultimately, she didn't believe it made any difference. Didn't believe counseling and community service did a thing for the already damaged, the already damned. And her own underlying contempt for her work made her sure of Larken's. It was a felt thing, a sympathetic vibration between them.

Being indifferent, though, was a far cry from being insane. What *was* there about him, when she studied him from a distance like this, that always ended by sending that cold thrill of suspicion up her spine? This conviction that the man was not really here, was deeply, utterly somewhere else?

She had to go meet with a counseling group. On impulse, she went over and leaned into Larken's nook on her way out.

"Hi Carl."

"Hey, Marjorie. The *Press Republican* says they'll run a feature for us."

"Super! Just put the copy on my desk."

"It's done. Take it with you. I'm going for a run soon. If you're out on the road, don't run me over."

A little standing joke. Larken worked a loose schedule, often taking long midday runs in the nearby countryside. She'd passed him a number of times, smiling and waving, wondering at what drove the guy — far from young, but every inch of him honed down to sinew and vein and tireless muscle. Heading out, she glanced at the copy of his feature:

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For those stricken by chemical addictions, shoplifting and other petty property misdemeanors are more the symptoms of an affliction than the acts of a real criminal. At Different Path, with the generous cooperation of the Superior Court of Sonoma County, we take these afflicted folks out of the criminal justice loop, and into a circle of care, counseling, and rehabilitation —

And so on. The usual. She paused at the exit to the parking lot and glanced back at Larken, balanced on his chair, murmuring into the phone. Those humanitarian homilies that he composed so glibly — they didn't really fit the man at all. He had all the standard smiles, the affable, earnest expressions. But the whole shape and aura of him...he looked about as compassionate as a coyote.

Larken's phone interview with "Dan G." was going well. It was amazing what people would just tell you about themselves. Back when he had taught at the junior college, he'd been delighted by how much personal revelation he could draw from his students with his writing assignments. He was always struck by how *faintly* these kids seemed to feel their own existence. They had to squint to see their own feelings. They had to strain to remember the things they had seen with their own eyes in the course of a single day. But when driven by an instructor, and the need of a grade, they could scrape some of it together, report what life was like for them.

"So Guy, if I have this straight...," Guy Blankenship was "Dan G.'s" real name, which Larken had gotten out of him easily enough, "...the meth cost you your wife and kids first, and then your house, and now, because you started spiking it, it's given you AIDS. And you're what? Only twenty-six?"

"It did a major number on me." This was spoken solemnly, almost with a kind of satisfaction.

"Well, I have to tell you that your story is one of the most moving ones I've ever heard, Guy. I want to suggest something to you. I want you to bear with me for a minute here, because I want to suggest an idea to you, and I need to work up to it a little, okay?"

"Sure. I don't mind." And you could hear his comfort with the

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conversation; Guy was well along in the morphine phase of his AIDS-related cancer.

"Okay. When you look out your window, what do you see? I want to get a feel for your neighborhood."

"Well. Mim's Market is right across the street, like a mom-and-pop. And boy, those kids with their skateboards and earrings, they like *live* on the sidewalk in front of it, I swear."

"You're on Prince over toward the Fairgrounds, right?"

"Right."

"And if you head down Prince, you hit Crestview. You probably turn on Crestview when you go down to the hospital, right?"

"That's right."

"So Guy, did you ever keep going up Crestview, into the hills behind the Fairgrounds?"

"Yeah. Marjorie took us up there to a picnic like just a few days ago."

"Oh right, she told me that. That's a great view up there, isn't it, Guy? Those big crooked oak trees down on the slope below that turnout there? Four centuries old, minimum, those oaks. You remember them, don't you? Huge big crooked old trees?"

"Big trees, yeah, sure."

"Well, just imagine this, okay, Guy? Imagine a bluejay landing on one of those trees' branches. Just fluttering down, and landing, pecking up a couple little bugs, *peck, peck,* and then flying right off again. Say he's there four seconds. Imagine how brief, how short, his time in that tree was, compared to the whole span of that tree's life. Just a quick blue blip that scarcely touches the tree at all. And that's how short your life on this Earth will have been, Guy, when you check out a year or so from now. Your whole stay on this glorious green globe...it'll hardly have happened at all."

"...what're you...you're sayin' like...." The guy's morphine patches definitely had him on glide. You could hear him trying to hook in to this idea, startled by suddenly realizing that his own existence, and his own death, were the focus of this conversation.

"I'm just telling you I feel for you, man. I wanted to share with you the *poignance* I feel in your situation. My good thoughts go out to you. I'm going to write up what you gave me. We'll talk soon, okay?"

"...okay...." Guy was more than morphine vague now. You could

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hear him struggling to bring these imponderables into focus. His own existence. His own death.

Larken gently hung up the phone. He very much craved a run. A couple hours chugging down the country blacktop would bring him back to a nearly empty building, and he could put the last few touches on the corporate newsletter. He slipped into his sleeveless running jersey, its once-black laundered to a light gray. Out the back, he broke into an easy trot across the parking lot.

For a mile or so it was all body shops and strip malls, gas stations and burger chains — lots of cars and mucho monoxide.... But after that, the street became a county two-lane which ran past rural lots and sprawling fields, some orchards and dairy farms still surviving here and there, but increasingly, grapevines out to the horizons.

He had an easy lope that ate the miles and never tired. He cruised in the tough vehicle of his bone and muscle, lightly oiled with sweat, and thought of his words to Blankenship. Reckless words if the guy should wake up enough to resent them. Reckless if Larken wanted to keep this job.

His problem was this exaltation, this high and reckless humor in his heart. For days now it had filled him, sneaked into him at odd moments as he worked, and set his heart floating. A foretremor of hope. A limbic tingle of something approaching — at long, long last!

His meditation as he ran was what it always was out here: Behold the visible world! How simply impossibly beautiful it was! The fields, the far-flung quilt of treelines over the hills, giant hermit oaks, swollen and crooked with vegetal muscle! Those towering windbreaks of eucalyptus, cascading with silver applause for the wind! Those hillsides of cattle gorgeously mottled black and white like antique ceramics. Those turkey-vultures hanging on man-sized wingspans above the roadkill feasts which were spread on the two-lane by the hustling Mercedes, Beemers, and SUVs, above all the pizzaed possums and skunks decorating the webbed highways....

Life! All its parts mortal, but in their aggregate, immortal and unstoppable. Life the star-conqueror. It spread and spread everywhere, slipping itself like a green glove over the bare, steaming bones of the universe.

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All living things were dangerous miracles. Each tree brimmed with majesty as it wore the light, and the wind moved through it, but anything that lived could blow up in your face. And if you *did* win your own immortality, then you must live it in the web of these mortal lives, and you must endure all of their deaths, death after death after death. And if the beauty of it all — fields farms trees skies suns stars — was almost unendurable now, must not immortality itself kill you if you did attain it? Kill you with all that excruciating beauty?

His run had passed the two-hour mark, and he decided to push it to three. First, a piss. In recent years, with San Francisco fortunes being pumped into the wine country, new fence lines and country estates had stripped the roadsides of the margins of old-growth trees and weedy coverts wherein a man might duck to pee concealed. Bleeding your lizard now required thought, and retention skills. He chose a crossroad toward a spot he knew.

There it was. A rank of big old eucalypti stood between the margin of the road and the fence of a vineyard. In a little strip of brush behind the trees stood the roofless ruin of a little cinder block hut.

Several well-trod footpaths crossed the poison oak and foxtail and blackberry vines, threading through the litter of trash in the weeds outside the hut: castoff shirts and shoes, a torn, stained mattress. He stepped through the concrete door frame. In the center of the heavily littered concrete floor was a little grass-choked drain-grate. He stood there, downloading hours of coffee into it, while high over his unroofed head the cascade-shaped eucalypti splashed and glittered in the breeze.

He liked the square solidity of this cinder block hull, which he guessed had been a tool shed. Its simple shape, tucked in this green nook, made him think of a little country temple in ancient Greece.

It was surprising how much of the litter in here was discarded clothing. Many a fieldworker who had tended the adjacent vineyard had surely found free sleep-space here in the warm months, and free drinking space, to judge by the beer cans and flattened cardboard of six-packs. Clothes, thrift-store stuff, were something the poor seemed to have in abundance. He noticed as he was zipping up that there was one little snarl of clothing, isolated slightly from the rest, that possessed the most amazing suggestion of personality.

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Here lay a pair of khaki workpants whose legs seemed to leap, and just above the pants' waist a red-and-black checked flannel shirt, its sleeves wide-flung, which seemed to be the top half of the same leap. To provide the clinching touch, one black tennis shoe lay just below one of the pantleg's cuffs. The shoe presented its sole to the cuff, but in every other respect it was oriented perfectly to become the leading foot of this clothes-fossil's leap. Just rotate the tennie one-eighty around its long axis and the effect would be perfect....

With a sense of ceremony, of an augmented silence surrounding him, he bent and inverted the shoe.

The result was remarkably expressive. This was a grand, balletic leap, an outburst of eloquence and power, a leap of jubilation...or an explosive escape. A surge of will to be shut of it all, to shed the body with one fierce shake, burst free and clear of the shabby garment of bone and skin.

The strangest surge of inspiration welled up in Larken. He'd noted a roadkilled possum a little way back down the road. Suppose he....

Don't weigh it, spontaneity was everything. With a leap of his own, he bolted from the hut, and ran back down the two-lane, retracing his approach.

Here was the possum, flat as a puddle, and baked crispy by several days of summer suns. It was a Cubist possum, where inner and outer possum parts — front, back, left, right — all shared the same plane. Hair, intestine, a ten-key piano-fragment of flattened vertebrae, a spill of teeth surrounding one raisin eye, a parenthesis of sinewy tail as naked as a rat's — all sides of the animal could be possessed at a glance without the trouble of walking around it.

Careful not to pause but to move fluidly at the prompting of his imagination, he took out his Buck knife and sawed through one leathery drumstick, obtaining a hind paw, and then he sawed and peeled free the tail's sharp comma. With his trophies he trotted back to the cinder block hut, feeling surer with each stride, more convinced he had found something real.

Stepping back inside the hut, Larken felt he was stepping into a pool of waiting silence, a tension of expectation. He knelt, and tucked the bone of the leg into the cuff of the hinder pantleg, so the possum's little clawed foot was providing the thrust for the leap. Then he tucked the root of the tail through the rearmost belt loop of the slacks.

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This was a decisive, perfecting touch. The little up-curving tailspike clarified the clothes-fossil's leap. Its emotion was both gleeful and savagely furious. This was a demon's frolicsome, vengeful leap.

And then, as if his enhancements themselves opened his eyes to a further one, he saw something he had not noticed. A little, flattened hat lying not far above the shirt's collar. He darted his hands out, half unfolded the hat, tilted it by half an inch — perfect!

It was one of those small-brimmed fedoras that bookies in old movies wore, and it was now cocked at just the exact angle to be perched upon the clothes-fossil's invisible head.

Larken was captivated. For a long moment he could only stand and gaze at what he had made. The original fossil was a ghost, and full of a ghost's haunting questions. And these marsupial parts Larken had given it were an answer, a new touch of evolution.

And then he felt a stirring somewhere near...and realized there was someone else in the little roofless room with him.

Though the knowledge crackled through him like lightning, he did not move by the slightest fraction. This Someone Else felt far nearer than anything visible could feel. This Someone's presence was like a chord struck ever so lightly, a fugitive coherence that reached his nerves without identifiable route through any of his senses.

Once long before, bellying cautiously up toward some possibly occupied bump in the jungle, Larken had heard (except he could not possibly have really *heard)* the faint thrum of a claymore's tripwire, as the guy off to that side of him tripped it — Harry Pogue, that had been — and Larken had slammed his face in mud with only that precious nanosecond of micro-noise for warning, and in consequence, Larken had lived, while Pogue's head had been brightly sprayed across an acre of green.

Not a sound he had heard, no. He'd known it even then. A Someone who had warned, had thrown him a fine filament of intimation, a slender bridge across the abyss of Annihilation Everlasting.

A Someone who was with him now.

What must Larken do? What was wanted? And because he had framed these panicky questions, instead of acting with instant instinct, and drawing understanding after, because in his heart, in his awe, he had hesitated — he could not grasp what must be done, could not capture the

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deep, veiled prompting. The moment passed, and then Larken knew that what this Someone wanted was solitude in this shrine. It wanted his withdrawal.

He backed out of the hut, slowly, ceremoniously, eyes downcast. He should speak something, some acknowledgment, some valediction. Again, his instincts failed him, no inspiration came, and he completed his withdrawal feeling the silence hanging there sullenly behind him, feeling his tongue-tied failure of grace in this first encounter.

MARJORIE GAVE HER CELL phone number to some of her clients at Different Path. She was wryly aware of a certain insincerity in this "personal touch," because she always left the phone in her Beemer, so she surrendered none of her real privacy with the gesture. It rang as she pulled into the parking structure of the downtown mall. She thought it would be Pat Bonds, her currently significant other. Guy Blankenship's vague, whiny voice disoriented her for a moment. She carried him and her conversation with him out of the parking structure and into the mall.

"It was like...it was un*real*. It suddenly hit me, he was like saying my life, my whole life. It was like this bluebird landing on a branch and pecking twice. My whole life was that short! He just...told me that. He just *said* that to me...."

Marjorie, making tracks toward the fountain, where she and Pat were to decide on their dinner destination, was saying things like, "Well that's ridiculous, Guy! You've got your whole life still ahead of you!" but meanwhile the image of those massive old oak trees, of the bluejay's quick flutter and flash among their leaves, struck her imagination indelibly as she strode past windows where Technicolor jellybeans gleamed in barrels, and Technicolor lingerie flaunted on headless white mannequins. And just as vividly, she visualized Guy Blankenship then: his plump red underlip, so slack and unprepared; his narrow, tufted eyebrows — minimal, as if the man was drawn in haste, and economy in materials was a priority.

That this poor, simple guy, his past and his memory of it so abbreviated by childhood abuse and hard drugs' erasure, and his future so short...that this Guy should also be seeing that same bird dance on that

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green bough, that he should be looking at his existence for the first time in his life like a wise man — it struck Marjorie as a minor miracle that Carl Larken had planted this vision in Guy Blankenship's mind.

And this made her see Larken again as she had once seen him, loping along in the dusk past orchards where the gloom had begun to gather under the tangled branches. He was a wolf-lean, muscled shape in her headlights who turned at her honk and waved as she passed. His face was a shadow-holed mask, the brambly hair thick on his brow like undercover he lurked in. She had feared him then, and she feared him now because she realized that something in her applauded the little mental cruelty he had done to Guy, that soft little twit from whose fingers the gift of life was leaking so swiftly away.

"I'm going to talk to Carl tomorrow, Guy, about that upsetting kind of talk."

"...well...."

"I'll call you tomorrow, Guy." She clicked off. There was Pat sitting handsomely ankle-on-knee, on one of the ornate benches surrounding the fountain, the picture of understated class. He saluted her with a white-capped latte, and handed her one of her own as she joined him on the bench.

"Fifty more acres of Zin," he told her. "A done deal."

He was just Marjorie's age, a bright, mellow guy, with a clarity of ambition beyond his years, who unlike her had no trouble with his class identity: a WineYuppie and proud of it. Bankrolled by his dad, a corporate attorney in San Francisco, Pat's lack of intellectual pretensions had made him content with the local junior college for the first two years of his B.A. in Business, and he'd had Carl Larken for an English instructor five or six years ago.

When Marjorie had first described her coworker to Pat, and they had discovered this funny little piece of common ground, it had struck her that Pat was covertly amused, that he had instantly perceived her hidden interest in the older man. Herself still unsure what that interest was, she told him now how Larken had tweaked Guy's imagination. "On one level it's kind of a raw thing to do," she offered in conclusion.

"Telling some terminal guy how short his life's gonna be? I guess you could call it that," Pat smiled. "He'd get on that note in class, I remember. Mortality, I guess you'd call it."

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"I guess you would." Smiling back at him. "Would you say, Pat, that Larken was, well, insane? Like quietly insane?"

There it was, the thing that kept bringing Larken up between them. She thought Pat's eyes confirmed her question, even while he was saying, "I don't know. Everyone's had one or two teachers like that, right? They've got a crazy routine, but they can be really entertaining sometimes."

She let a beat go by. "Would you say, Pat," (batting her eyes like the question was occurring to her for the first time), "that Larken is, like, quietly insane?"

She wrung a laugh out of him with that. "Well, I remember one thing he told us. He compared a guy being blown apart by a mine to a guy dying of old age. He said the years hit the old guy just like the frags hit the soldier — the years blew the old guy to a fog too, they just took longer to impact him.... But hey, the guy acts like he's got a purpose. I see him on the road chuggin' away. Could an insane guy stay in the kind of shape he's in?"

"You still haven't answered me, but screw it. Let's eat. How 'bout sushi?"

The Sun was declining when Larken locked the offices' back door behind him, unlocked his ten-speed and mounted it.

He didn't head straight home. He pedaled for hours through town, ricocheting randomly through the city's maze, whirring down long ranks of street lamps, down streets of houses and treed lawns, down streets of neons and flashing signals — trying to wear out the eagerness and fear that struggled in him.

At last it was time to aim his flight out toward the darkness surrounding the city. Along four miles of lampless two-lane, the last two winding through gentle hills, he sped deep into the crickety country night. The waxing Moon, well up, said nearly midnight when he steered into the narrow gravel driveway that branched from the road up into his seven acres of wooded slope.

He dismounted and shouldered the bike, carried it up the drive amidst the tree-shadows. He had spread with his own spade this blue-shale gravel. He practiced the skill of silently treading it — liked to come soundless into his property. As he climbed the slope, the leafy gloom chirred with bug

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life, and breathed down on him the dry scents of bay and manzanita and oak and madrone. Something at least coon-sized skittered in dry leaves upslope of him. A pair of owls were trading their tentative syllables.

He branched from his driveway onto a much narrower deer-trail that crooked its way steeply up. Near the crest of his property, on a crescent of levelish ground, a slant-grown oak laid the dome of its branches partly on the grass. Under this crook-ribbed canopy Larken had his sleeping bag. His little aluminum food locker dangled from a branch above his Sierra trail-stove: a number-ten can with its ends cut out and a flap cut in its rim for feeding sticks through. It channeled enough heat from a few handfuls of twigs to boil his oatmeal, and the fire was near invisible at any distance.

He unrolled his leather mat and sleeping bag, and lay half-curled around the little stove and its bubbling one-quart pot of porridge studded with nuts and dried fruits. He garnished his meal with black strap molasses and ate it with a spoon, eating faster as it cooled.

Afterward he lay on top of his bag, looking up at the stars that blazed thick through his oak-leaf dome. These hills were a maze of little valleys — in all directions were pocket vineyards, small ranches, country houses. Here and there, faint in distance, dogs sometimes barked, taunted perhaps by fox, coyote, coon, or bobcat.

His body lay slumped in fatigue, but his senses ate up the wide-flung night. Homecoming tires hissed on the road, coming fewer and fewer as the stars blazed more thickly. Four-legged things were afoot in several places on his own acres. The peremptory little tearing sounds of what had to be coon paws were shredding something down in the old overgrown garden where potatoes and tomatoes thinly persisted. A clumsier more faintly heard scrabbling, from just about down at the compost heap...that would be possum.

The thought conjured the clothes-fossil, never far from his thoughts these eight hours past. It dawned on him only then. He had found it a footless, anchored thing, but he had left it clawed and shod. And those claws, whose awkwardness on asphalt made the possum the commonest species of road-pizza, made him a nimble traveler up in the trees, a nomad of the arboreal highway.

The Someone Else who joined him in that hut today...could he *follow* Larken now?

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He lay there on the little piece of earth he owned, trying to detect something like a footfall, or a faint, faint click of claw on branch. Joy and terror hammered at his heart. Could he be on the threshold at last, the threshold of the thing he had sought all his life? He had exiled himself from so much, left his precious family behind — Jolly, his wife, sweet Maxie and sweet little Jack, his daughter and son....

He could not bear to think of them, of leaving them behind forever. How many years now? More than three. From that moment of departure, he had stepped into this absolute solitude....

Perhaps a half mile off, coyote voices began kindling, as if in direct answer to his train of thought. Of course the settling in of the midnight chill — as now — was often the signal for their song. Larken was wary of seeing omens everywhere, the mark of the lunatic. Still.... It had been coyotes who had conveyed to Larken his first revelation — had shown him the promise for whose sake he had left his dearly beloved ones behind. The animals' ghostly sound was wholly undoglike. It was a giddy wailing and hooting, a sardonic gibbering — the music of exiled demons begging for readmittance to the underworld.

LARKEN HAD LONG made a practice of extended moonlit treks through the hills. All this land was owned, of course, and so there would be fences even in the deepest hills — fences around the vineyards, around the more sprawling yellow-grass ranches where cattle grazed, around the country estates. He carried a small boltcutter for the stubborn few fences he could not otherwise penetrate. When he had to pass near houses, he found it amusing to revive his jungle patrol skills, learned so well in Vietnam, modified for this sparser cover.

His goal was the entry of the hills themselves, to move through them as their inhabitant, as linked to the Earth as any fox, as roofed by the sky. His night vision, given only a strong Moon to work with, was excellent, as were his skills for quiet movement, and he had surprised many a deer on his travels, a silver fox, and twice a wildcat, but never, before that night, a coyote.

It seemed they caught your slightest move a mile away, and politely, invariably declined contact. And yet they went everywhere in these hills.

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They fed from men's very decks and porches, fearlessly devouring unwary cats and small dogs practically from their owners' laps. The coyotes filled their world to the brim without once confronting the simian squatters who claimed every foot of it, and roared up and down their roads killing every other natural denizen — even, rarely, the foxes — but never, to Larken's knowledge, claiming a single coyote as roadkill. Like colliding galaxies, the two nations drifted right through each other — or theirs drifted through ours.

It had been a windy night, that night where his life had taken its turning. The atmosphere, in flood, was trying to wash the trees right off the hills. The big oaks twisted and shuddered like black flames in the moonlight, and the white grass rippled and bannered.

The wind that night made him feel his chronic longing. The wind, trying to stampede the trees, was roaring for a grand, universal departure to another solar system, a better deal, and the grass struggled to join the rootless giant of the air. All that lives strives to fly, to master time. All tribes of beings strain to rise in insurrection, all knowing their time is short, all, when the wind blows, wanting to climb aboard.

He climbed in the wind's teeth, up to the last ridge line before the plain, where the city glowed. He rounded a hill-shoulder toward a vantage point he liked when, completing the curve, he stopped just short of walking into three coyotes who were oppositely bound. All four of them froze, and stood staring at each other.

The gibbous Moon, declining at Larken's back, put a glint in the six canine eyes. He looked at each in turn, and settled on the eyes, not of the largest, but of the one who stood foremost, a lean bitch with a jaw that was slightly crooked.

Larken was moved by their beauty, not the least uncomfortable. At first he thought they were shocked, embarrassed even at this direct discovery. Animal etiquette would call for a slow side step, a careful withdrawal that avoided any signal of a wish to flee.... But the bitch, head low, stood planted, fixedly regarding him. Though the wind was contrary, she dabbed her nose toward him. The two males flanking her then did the same, were probably her big-grown pups, still in training for all their size.

The fixity of their stare became fascinating to him. He dabbed his own

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face at them, snuffed their air, in case this was a necessary greeting. Snuffed, and a whiff of something ice-cold came to him.

It was a scent of...terror. Awe. The coyotes reeked of it...it was raising their hackles, was causing them to crouch and tense....

He watched enraptured, until it dawned on him, *finally* came to him. He turned — the turning seemed to take forever — turned to look behind him.

Hovering above the wind-whipped grass, revealed against the distant fields of city lights behind it, something towered in the air, a transparent something that twisted the lightfield into a snarled weave, as if the lights were a colored net just barely containing the fight of a huge translucent catch.

Even as he struggled to make out its giant form...it was no more. The moonlight dissolved it. The city lights gleamed undisturbed.

The coyotes stirred now, shaking off their holy awe. They gazed at Larken a moment, perhaps with interest. Then they turned, wet muzzles glinting in the moonlight, and melted into the grass.

Larken stood there. All his life — long before 'Nam, which had just clarified it — all his life he had longed to find this doorway, this path that could lead him off the treadmill of time and death.

His legs buckled under, he dropped like lead and sat in the deep grass, staring at the lightfield where that Someone had stood. He found himself slowed to a synchrony with the Earth-clock itself, and sat there unmoving as the starfield inched across the sky. He then knew that when he returned to his wife and children, it would be to take his leave of them forever.

He knew he had been mocked in this revelation. Here he'd been tramping through the night, the earnest searcher, while the power and glory he was dogging followed him unperceived. How long had this Someone mocked him?

How long had this Someone mocked Larken? Back through the decades, had every cloud of crows that burst in flight before him been, in reality, exploding in mirth at oncoming Larken with his giant follower, the derisive god behind him?

Well, it was the gods' prerogative to mock. Larken had been shown at last. He had accrued fifty years of spiritual hunger, poverty and nonentity and finally, it seemed, had amassed his down payment on eternity.

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Oh the price! It was an unending agony to pay, to be denied forever dear Jolly, sweet, sweet Maxie and Jack. But it was a father's place to die before his children, to show them, with his calm as he steps out into the great Dark, that they have nothing to fear, that their own path will be bearable. How could he abide with them while they aged year by year, and he aged no further? Far easier for them to know no more of him beyond tonight, than to learn that he was not of their world, and was to live beyond even his own memory of their existence.

So when that morning's Sun rose, Carl Larken turned forever onto his present path, and lived in solitude.

He smiled a barbed smile now that tore his heart, and felt the scald of bitter tears. He'd put down everything he had that very day — turned aside from his life, and the careless god, having beckoned him, had left him hanging, utterly alone, these three years since.

But what are years to a god? What are a man's tears? And now the god, or perhaps the god's messenger, had touched him between the eyes, and run a finger down his spine. Said *Yes. I am here.*

Larken crushed out his coals, washed out his oatmeal pan from the jug of water in his food locker — locked everything up and rehung it from the branch. Then he carried his mat and sleeping bag out from under the oak to a level spot, and lay down, still clothed, on top of the bag, lay scanning the thick strew of stars visible through this gap in the trees.

And heard, or almost heard, that faint, clawed tread — the clothes-ghost he had conjured, coming now, drawing nearer, coming to offer Larken what he had lived for. Coming to tell him the price.

He realized it didn't matter whether he actually heard this or not. Because now, after fifty-five years, he was about to step up to his threshold and confront the god. This had been granted, he knew it in his spine.

Strangely, the most immediate effect on him was not jubilation, but a renewed agony at the price he had paid for this victory. Dear Christ, his precious Jolly! His precious Maxie, and little Jack! Eternal exile from them! How had he mustered the strength, the resolution?

They were his only riches, a fortune he had stumbled blindly into, undeservingly. His and Jolly's first years together, after he had come back, drugged and raging, from the war, had been dissolute years. They drank

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and drugged and fucked and fought. On the wings of substances, as they took wobbly flight together, he had tried to show her his most private faith — his mad hope that time could be broken like shackles, and a soul, a fiercely desiring soul, could burn forever.

But then priceless, accidental Maxie befell them, and Jolly became wholly Mother overnight. Larken himself took three more years, sullenly sucking booze and powders, before turning to at last, and taking on his fatherhood. By then, equally accidental Jack had arrived, and the rusty doors of Larken's heart were forced all the way open.

In that deep, tricky torrent of parental love and nurturing, the next fourteen years fled away. The immortal fire persisted in Larken's inmost self, but he could not share it with his children. He found it a faith too perilous to speak — a magic he would lose if he tried to bestow it. His children's minds grew strong and agile, but he could not find the words. Before he knew it, Maxie was in middle school, Jack just graduating elementary. Behold, they had friends, passionate interests, lives laid out before them in the world! They had already left him when at last the god vouchsafed to beckon him. Only that made it possible for him to renounce them.

He wiped his tears and listened to the night. The price he had paid was past counting, but his purchase was vast. He had bought nothing less than this whole world, night and day, north and south, now and forever. Was he insane, to feel this reckless certainty? Wasn't this blasphemy? Hubris? Wouldn't it cost him his prize?

He could not think so. This bitter joy refused to leave him. He listened to the night, deep night now, where living things moved quietly about their mortal business. Upslope of him, deer moved very carefully, small-footed through the scarcely rustling oak leaves. Far down on the two-lane he heard the faint, awkward *scritch* of a skunk (awkward as possums, skunks) beginning to cross the asphalt.

Whoops. Far down the two-lane, the beefy growl of a grunt-mobile. Enter Man on the stage of night, roaring high, wide and handsome in a muscle-truck — a tinny sprinkle of radio music above the roar. Closing fast, with a coming-home-from-the-bar aura. It must be just after two....

Larken listened to the tires as it roared near, roared past — and yes, there it came, that *whump-crunch-thumpa-thumpa* as the skunk was

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taken for a high-speed dribble down the court beneath the sixty-mile-an-hour underframe of the truck.

He lay listening. All the dyings! Everywhere, all the time. The coyotes announced themselves, very far off now, but with the gibbering intensity of a group kill. Webbed wings made a tiny, soft commotion — a bat, zig-zagging bugs from the air. All the mulch, all the broken, gutted things settling down to decay.... He felt a shift in his bowels.

He rose and got his little entrenching tool, and a small canteen of water — set out slantwise up the hill, and upwind of his camp.

High on the slope, he crouched on a crescent of deep soil, and a fine, round shit came loose from him. Filling his cupped hand from the canteen, he washed and rinsed himself, and washed his hands. He buried his accomplishments, thinking how coyotes and foxes left their scat right on the trail. When those animals retraced their steps at later times, they nosed the scats and knew themselves, sniffed the ghosts of previous meals. Each time they nosed the fading map of former days, the ever-fainter proofs of their own being, dwindling to rumors. Was this their sense of Time?

Men, more murderous animals, secreted their shit, hiding the lees of their innumerable victims...fearing vengeance?

Larken must make an offering to the clothes-ghost. Tomorrow. Must give it...something for a heart.

PRECISELY AT THE SUN'S first kindling on the eastern hills, Larken, his bike propped by a tree, stood again before the little cinder block shrine.

He had pedaled for an hour in the dawn's light, scouting the country roads for a fit offering. He had hoped for the rare luck to find something he'd happened on before: a road-struck animal whose life had not yet left it. He remembered once running, and coming up eye to eye with a possum that had not yet finished dying. There was still a little bit of him left there in his inky little possum's eyes. The beast was looking back forgetfully at life, looking into Larken's eyes forgetful that he was human, seeming to struggle to remember something they had in common long ago....

Had he been given such a find it would have amounted to an omen from the god that his improvised ritual was welcomed. As it was, he found

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a rare enough thing indeed — a silver fox, whose bush, ruffled by the breeze, had caught his eye. The fox was beautifully intact — back-broken, not mauled — and dead not very many days.

This was much, he reflected as he eased it into his old khaki knapsack. Enough to be a kind of warrant from the god. Foxes, these sharp-muzzled tricksters, were almost never nailed by monkey Man's grunting pig machines. He had to pedal hard to bring this rarity to the shrine before the Sun's rising, and made it there just at the instant that the first light struck the gray wall.

He knew, seeing that, that this rite of his was welcomed, and the god was present to receive his offering.

He stepped inside, his knapsack cupped before him in both hands. The clothes-ghost seemed to float on the floor, to glow, so full of feral insolence, of fierce and graceful glee its posture was. Under the hat's slanted bill, the spark of an eye almost glinted. The jauntiness of that up-hooked tail, the sinewy thrust of that clawed foot.... It *knew!*

Larken knelt down slowly on one knee. He felt the ghost's seething aura of energy, waiting for Larken to find the awakening magic to give him form and force.

He drew the reeking fox-that-was from the sack. Sun had shrunk its tendons — there was a stiffness that made the little corpse more wieldy. He gripped the gray pelt at the spine just below the neck, and with his other hand, lifted one flap of the ghost's shirt. He felt no need for words. He shrouded the fox inside the ghost's shirt, willing spirit into this inhuman gatekeeper. His hidden hand felt in an alien space, felt the heat and menace of a hostile dimension.

Just as he withdrew his hand, it was powerfully, searingly bitten.

Torn to the bone, both the palm and the back of his hand. Blood, its astonishing crimson, welled blazing out of him in the morning light.

He stood staring at his hand full of blood.

Was this a message?

What was the message?

An engine, something big and huffy, was idling not far off. Larken had to stand a moment, struggling to decide if the sound came from that eternal world where his hand had been torn, or from this one his feet were planted on.

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He seized up a sun-bleached fragment of T-shirt from one corner, bound his hand and knotted it with his teeth. The bandage went instantly red as he thrust the hand inside the light windbreaker he wore. His bike outside already declared him. He stepped out into the slanting Sun, picked up his bike with his left hand, and stepped through the trees to the road with it. A young man stood by a black Jeep Cherokee, arm draped on the roof.

Larken smiled easily at him, straddled his bike with his hand still tucked away, stood on one pedal and slowly coasted over to him.

"The pause that refreshes," he said to the young man who, looking surprised, said:

"Mr. Larken!"

Larken, when teaching junior college, had infallibly Mistered and Mized all his students, and after a beat, he said, "Mr. Bonds! This *is* a pleasure! Is this your...estate you're viewing?"

Pat was remembering Marjorie's question yesterday. No doubt about it, there was something subtly but deeply not normal about this guy. He steps out of a ruined shed at dawn, steps smiling out of the trees with his hidden hand making what looked like it might be a bloodstain in the armpit of his jacket, then cruises over to Pat, totally suave and smiling. And not only does he remember Pat after what, six years? But he even remembers the little standing jokes between them about Pat's pragmatism, his fiscal realism, his good-humored disinterest in big ideas.

The old man had a real...charisma. Complete self-possession. But sitting here with a bloodstain spreading across his jacket, having just stepped out of a fucking abandoned shed at sunrise...this self-possession looked more than a little unreal.

"I don't own these grapes themselves. I'm in the development sector of the viticulture industry. We design acquisitions, financing. We're going to get fifty more acres of Zin out of this field."

Larken looked across a sea of grapes from fence to fence. "Where are you going to get it?"

"Here and there along the margins. We'll get a good ten acres here when we tear out that shed and this border strip."

At this Larken just nodded, but he let a beat go by. "Are you leaving any eucalyptus?"

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"Just one line at the roadside. We'll take those out later this year. They create a shadowing problem for the new acres." Pat found himself getting a little stiffer as he went on. He still *amused* Larken on a level he didn't get. That was okay when he was the guy's student — a teacher is supposed to run some attitude on you, poke at your perspective. But this man, this whacko old man with his chickenfeed job, found something genuinely funny about the way Pat was, after all, engineering this entire environment here.

And the man seemed to sense his thought. "A world-shaper," he smiled at Pat. "I saw it long ago."

"Well, every generation *shapes* things, right? Every generation makes what they can, builds what they can make use of."

"You are absolutely right, Mr. Bonds. You can't take a single step on this old globe without changing it. So when are you clearing this section?"

"Tomorrow." And Pat had scored something, he felt it. Where's your contempt for money and power now, he asked the old man in his mind. There's something he values here, and just twenty-four hours from now I'm making it disappear.

Then Larken smiled again. "Time is on the wing, isn't it? On the *wing*. Which reminds me, I've got to get to work. Good to see you!"

When Larken had pedaled off, right hand still tucked beneath his arm, Pat entered the weedy margin behind the trees. He wondered how he'd failed to ask Larken how he hurt his hand. He stepped into the cinder block shed.

Nothing. Trash and discarded clothing everywhere. Just a useless eyesore. A perfect place to be scraped clean. Developed.

As he climbed back in his Jeep, he thought of Larken's eyes, gray eyes under shaggy brows. There was an intention behind those eyes, something fixed and unyielding. What might a trashy nook like this one here mean to a war-scarred old guy like that, a bookish man of the kind who brooded about big ideas? Who could tell? The fact remained that, just meeting Larken's eyes as he'd emerged from that shed, Pat had felt like a trespasser here.

Marjorie was northbound on 101. The three P.M. traffic was clotting and creeping around her, still five miles south of town, where she was

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already fifteen minutes late for coffee with Pat at Espresso Buono. When she reached him on his cell phone, she could tell that he, too, was carbound.

"Where are you, Pat?"

"One-oh-one. I'm just above Novato."

"Christ, you're thirty miles behind me. I'm just north of Rodent Park."

"Things ran late at the title company."

"It's kind of romantic, Pat, the two of us just cruising the traffic-stream together, trading sweet nothings."

"Are you actually *cruising* that close to town?"

"Actually no, it's creep and crawl.... " Should she tell him? On the phone like this? "I was just down in Petaluma. I had to go see the mother of the guy I told you about, Guy Blankenship? He had morphine patches, right? Well he, like, put on half a dozen of them last night. He overdosed. He's dead. He left a note, or he started a note. It said *tell Carl.*"

"Whoa."

"Right. Well, the police asked me about it. It's a wrongful death, right? I said I didn't know who it was. I said I'd look into it and maybe get back to them."

"Did you tell Larken?"

"He didn't come to work today, and he doesn't have a phone."

A little silence passed between them. Marjorie was picturing Carl Larken out for a run along some two-lane. She pictured the city ahead of her and thought of it semi-abstractly as an environment, as the habitat of Larken. That gaunt graybeard, implacable as Jeremiah. Picturing him like this, it seemed incredible to her that she had not seen his madness sooner. He was no longer a creature of civilization. He was like an animal that infiltrated the city by day, and returned to the hills by night. The man was almost auraed with otherness.

"Hey, Marjo? Tell the police. It's no harm to Larken. They'll hard-time him a little is all, and maybe he needs a little accountability check here."

Marjorie laughed, thinking of the vivid Mrs. Blankenship, whose ramshackle house she had just left — the woman a bleached, cigarette-throated, leather-vested speedfreak. "No harm? If they told his mother,

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and she found someone smart enough to help her with it, she'd sue the corporation's socks off."

"You know I ran into him this morning?"

Larken lost himself in an endless patrol, beelining across the hills. He carried his little boltcutter for the stubbornest fences. He crossed pasture and vineyard and tree-choked streamcourse. Carefully void of intention, he chose his course as randomly as he could.

In these hills he had at last been shown, invited. Now, as Time closed in on him, these hills must show him his next step. He gripped this faith and patrolled them, hour after hour.

The Sun had begun to wester. When he was startled out of his walking reverie, he was amazed to realize just how oblivious he'd been. Aware of nothing but these acres of rolling pasture dropping away before him, when close behind him, a voice said, "I see you have a boltcutter there. Is that what you used to cut through my fence?"

When he turned, there was a frail old woman walking toward him from a Jeep — the old-fashioned military-looking kind — parked a short way down the fire-break path his feet had been treading so automatically.

The lady wore khaki work clothes, and a gray canvas hat with a little circular brim. She was so frail; hair as wispy as web escaped the hat. She was frail and there was something else about her — a scent he could almost pick up. "You've done it before, too, haven't you?" she urged, her voice very level, though age made it waver slightly. "You like to follow a beeline across people's property."

He smiled gently. "You've determined to call the devil by his name, right to his face, hesitation be damned," he said with admiration. "From now on you're not going to waste time with caution."

"I never have. You talk about caution. Am I in danger here from you?"

He had been honestly absorbed in her. She would be an omen, of course! Part of the answer he was after. But when she asked him this question, it stunned him for a moment, the alienness of the notion that he should lift his hand against her frailty. And in that moment he identified that faint scent she had. Chemotherapy.

"You are correct, Ma'am," he was saying, "I do make beelines. I damage as little fence as possible, but sometimes I need to follow the route

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I'm feeling. You are in absolutely no danger from me. I'm afraid I might have a pretty uncouth appearance, but I'm a good person. I did two tours in Vietnam, a lot of them in-country, and I guess it's left me a little reclusive."

The slopes of dried grass below them were growing golder in the slanting Sun. That rich light flooded her face with such detail. Blue veins across her forehead, the fine-china translucence of her wrinkled eyelid, her hair's sparseness betrayed by the looseness of her hat. She watched him as he spoke, not so much listening to his words as following her own train of thought about him. "You tell me I've decided not to waste time on caution. You seem to be telling me that I'm obviously someone with not much time left. Suppose that's true. Why should that make me care any less about vandalism to my property?"

"When I ventured that description of your state of mind, Ma'am, I meant to express my admiration. I don't dispute the wrongness of damaging your fence. My trespass was totally impersonal, and I did no harm to your property — "

"Except to its boundary!"

"Except to its fence. May I guess, Ma'am? Are you that little beef ranch, a hundred acres or so, triple-strand barbed wire?" Her icy look was as good as a nod. "I will of course pay you whatever damages you see fit."

Again, she seemed, rather than listening, to be struggling to digest him. "I've seen you on the roads, you know, over the years — running, cycling. I've seen you running out of your driveway. You call yourself a recluse, and I've had exactly that thought about you as I drove past, that you were a kind of hermit. Completely in your own world."

"But aren't you completely in yours?"

"Are you hinting again? That you know I'm dying?"

"I'm just trying for an understanding. I'm dying too."

"Not as fast as I am." Almost wry here, her fragile, skull-stretched face. He could sense her mood exactly. She was partly lured by an unlooked-for understander of her plight, but equally was stung by his understanding. In the pinch, she reverted to legalities. "I called the sheriff on my cell phone as soon as I found the damage, and I told them I suspected you. I felt a little bad about that, not being positive, but then I took the Jeep out, and found you practically red-handed."

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Understanding flooded him. This woman was not an omen to him, she was more than that. She was *in herself* a gift, a token of passage. He understood now the garish Sign that had been given him, in return for his morning's offering: his right hand full of blood.

"I'm sure, of course," she was saying, "that the officers, after writing up a report, will let us settle it between ourselves."

All this golden light! It was beginning to shade over to voluptuous red-gold. Hills rolled away on all sides, and the two of them stood bathed in this ocean of light, and at the same time, they were utterly unwitnessed by another human. Perfectly alone together in all this big emptiness, with the royal Sun, alone, looking on. Larken, before setting out on his day's quest, had made and properly tied a bandage for his right hand, though the red stain had seeped through even this one. Perhaps because she sensed his own sudden awareness of it, she took note of his wound for the first time. "How did you hurt your hand?"

He smiled apologetically. "I was bitten."

"Bitten by what?"

"I was bitten by a god. A god who is about to break out from these hills. Is about to hatch from them. He has promised me...immortality."

He had her full, bemused attention. He pulled the bandage off his hand. Out of the deep tear in his flesh, black-scabbed though it was, the naked tendons peeked.

The setting Sun gilded the trenched meat, and it glowed like a sacrament.

Deep night. The county road far below him had at last gone quiet and empty.

The darkness, even after these long hours of it, still felt like a balm to Larken, as if the bright work of blood-spilling that he had done today had scorched his retinas, and made sunlight agony to them.

He lay far upslope under one of his oak trees, his own hillside rock-solid under his back. He lay perfectly still, wholly relaxed, so that the vast crickety sound of the night felt like a deep lake he sank in, deeper with each heartbeat into the creaking, trilling music of the Earth's nocturne.

And then, woven into that vast music, it began to be faintly, sinisterly audible.

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So far off at first, so sketchy: a jostle of leaves...a friction against bark. An approach. Something moving through the leafy canopy, something small and very far, picking its way from branch to branch. It meandered, finding its path through contiguous trees, but it was seeking him.

To Larken's ears this faint advance might as well have been thunder, for there was nothing else in the world but it. Because the Earth was opening beneath him. This visitation he had bought with human blood would leave him changed forever, would actually begin his removal from this world, and his advance toward eternity. He lay there, waiting as he had waited all his conscious life, to step off of the Earth, and into the universe.

It wasn't as small as it had sounded, now that it was working its way up the slopes of Larken's property. He began to hear a muscular agility, which had helped to mute its approach but, nearing, betrayed a solid mass laddering its way through the branches and boughs.

Just a short way down the slope from where he lay, his visitant came to a stop. In the short silence that followed, Larken felt an alien intent grow focused on him.

Sssssssst.

It was a summons, and its echo changed the air as it drifted up among the oaks and madrones. The night mist grew more spacious, its very molecules drawing apart, as if mimicking the separations of the stars themselves.

He got to his feet, and doing so took forever, his legs, hands, arms slow travelers across the interstellar emptiness that had entered each cubic foot of the night air. He threaded downslope through bushes — manzanita, scrub oak, bay, scotch broom — that were abstract silhouettes, like archetypes, but whose odors, rich and distinct, filled him with a terrible nostalgia for that mortal world that he was now abandoning.

He stopped, doubting that he dared, after all, all, all...to do this. It spoke again instantly, in answer to his hesitation:

Sssssssst.

Down he walked, dazed but footsure, stepping down through eons of mist and shadow....

Here was the big oak tree that marked an arc of level ground where Larken's long-defunct compost patch lay. Up in its branches was where

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his caller awaited him. It seemed that from the tree's overarching mass a fine, impalpable panic rained down. As if the tree itself, that crooked old leafy mortal, radiated its terror at what this man was bent on doing. Larken stood in this faint rain of fear, like a warning breathed down by the tree.

Though his fear was dire, his hesitation had left him. His legs had carried him too many miles and years on this path to retreat from its terminus.

Its terminus, this compost patch — a sunken crust now which the oak's canopy overhung. A dried, sunken, vegetal crust which to Larken was terror itself, a patch of Absolute Zero. He came to the brink of the worst place on Earth.

There was a small, energetic commotion in the oak's lower branches. Feet, shod in something like track shoes but gaudier, dangled into view from the lowest bough. These shoes were blazoned with stripes and chevrons in sweeping curves of some glossy material colored copper and silver, and dully luminous, burnished, giving off an inner light. Short legs followed, too-short legs sheathed in baggy cholo-pants whose excess material stacked in bulges on the shoes' tops.

This was the dreadful ripening of what Larken had lived to summon, and only the combined weight of his whole past life — though such a frail, slight weight it seemed now! — sufficed to hold him steady on his legs, sufficed to plant him to confront this strange fruit's falling, at long last.

The visitant dropped to the ground and stood entire upon the crusty mat. He was a natty little monster three feet high. The whiskered, 'gator-toothed snout of a possum was likest to the face he thrust forth with a loll-tongued leer of greeting. He was jauntily hatted with a snap-brimmed bookie's fedora of straw — or woven brass? For it glowed like dirty dull gold. The hat was cocked arrogantly over one beady black eye. His baggy black sportscoat was hung up at the back on the upthrust sickle of his tail, a huge rat's tail, a stiff, dried tail, a comma of carrion whose roadkill scent Larken caught on the cold air of this eternity.

The visitant hissed, *Feeeed me* — its tongue, a limber spike of black meat, stirring in its narrow nest of canines.

Larken discovered at his side something he had not noticed: a shovel standing upright, stabbed into the earth.

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Stepping out of an airplane into an alien night sky above Vietnam had been nothing to this, but Larken did it in the same kind of here-I-go instant: he took up the shovel, and stabbed it into the scab of compost.

He dug, knowing without thinking exactly where to dig.

It was his own heart he shoveled out chunks of and spilled to one side.

The shovel was heavy and cold, did not warm to his hands. It was time's tooth, chewing up lives and spitting them out. It bit out his heart, and dumped it to one side.

He had not understood. He would not have done it if he had known how they were to serve.

Careful, very careful he was near the depth that he knew. He knelt at the last, and scraped the soil away with his hands.

He uncovered a little arm, the slender, bow-and-arrow arc of two bones, the flesh all but moldered away. He stood up and turned away, his tears streaming down for those precious bones, that little arm.

The visitant's steps crunched across the compost. Something much more massive than that dapper little monster it sounded like. The monster's littleness was so dense with greed, as dense as the heart of a neutron star.

Larken stood with his back turned, tears streaming, as the Messenger feasted behind him, as it ripped at the compost and soil in a horrid undressing of the precious bodies sleeping in their garment of earth. The sound of its feeding, the gnashing and guttural guzzling, long it lasted, and he would carry that sound into eternity.

When the meal was done, the visitant spoke again.

The price is two more. They are here.

And Larken heard a distant purr and crackle, car tires crunching up his drive. He turned and saw glints of headlights far below, and the beam of a patrol car's searchlight climbing the twisted ribbon of gravel.

The first officer said, "Christ. It's abandoned." Their headlights, as they pulled up onto the narrow plateau where the driveway ended, flooded against a little house walled in weeds and vines, its roof a thick sloping scalp of dead leaves a foot deep sprouting grass also dead now in the dry fall.

They got out and splashed their flashlight beams across windows

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opaque with rain-spotted dust. They approached the gaping front door, and poured their beams inside, across furniture blurred by dust and leaves and cobwebs.

"Christ," echoed the second officer. "We're not gonna find him here."

The first shrugged. "Some indications of whereabouts, maybe."

They moved farther into the house, and the floor felt the same underfoot as the ground had. Their beams woke a startling scuttle and scramble of animal paws. They tried light switches that didn't work. Kitchen and living room conjoined with no wall between. The second officer began to search these rooms.

The first officer followed a short hallway farther inside. The hallway was festooned with dusty cobwebs, and behind this dust, was walled with books, books, books, their ranked titles like muffled shouts and exclamations choking in the dark.

Insanity. Right here. If the guy's brain was packed with all these mummified shouts, then the missing woman was dead. The officer, though he tingled with this intuition, dismissed it as ungrounded, at least so far. There was no denying, though, that to leave a house like this, just abandon it with everything in it, indicated some kind of insanity — if it didn't prove homicide.

The door to the bathroom opened off this hall.

Tacked to the bathroom door was a drawing. It was clearly a very old one, done with pencils and colored markers. It was divided in panels on an oversize sheet of art paper. In each panel the father, small daughter, and smaller son appeared to be self-drawn. The panels presented a narrative: The trio find their cat nursing five kittens. The family dog licks the kittens while the mother cat stands by with raised hackles and fluffed-out tail. They carry the kittens in a box. They stand in front of a supermarket with the box, the little girl handing a kitten to another little girl. The kittens look like slugs with pointed ears and tails. Dad is clownishly self-drawn with big ears and wild hair, the little girl very precisely drawn with pony tail and bangs and a pretty dress, the boy drawn with barely controlled energy, head and limbs various in size from panel to panel, hair all energetic spikes.

The officer heard a shift of mass, a sigh.

"Ted?"

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A big, sinewy shape stood in his flashlight beam. The officer struggled to clear his sidearm.

"I'm sorry," the shape said sadly, and cut his throat.

UP BEFORE SUNRISE. Marjorie hated getting out of bed in the dark, but loved the payoff once she was dressed and rolling down the country roads in the first light, cruising and owning them almost alone. The countryside here used to be a lot more interesting, though. She remembered it in her girlhood — orchards, small ranches, farmhouses, each one of these houses a distinct personality.... Money, she thought wryly, scanning the endless miles of grapevines, all identically wired and braced and drip-lined, mile after mile — money was such a powerful organizer.

As the dawn light gained strength, and bathed the endless vines in tarnished silver, it struck her that there was, after all, something scary about money, that it could run loose in the world like a mythic monster, gobbling up houses and trees, serving strictly its own monstrous appetite.

But there was Pat and his crew ahead. A bright red Japanese earthmover — skiploader in front, backhoe behind — had already bladed out the wide strip of bramble and weed between the vineyard fence and the roadside rank of eucalyptus. The mangled vegetation had already been heaped in a bright orange dump truck which was now pulling out for the dump, passing Marjorie as she approached. The next load the truck would be returning for had not yet been created, but Marjorie could see what it would be. The earthmover, with its backhoe foremost now, stood confronting the cinder block shed. The hydraulic hoe's mighty bucket-hand rested knuckles-down against the earth, like the fist of a wrestling opponent, awaiting the onset. Its motor idled while its short, stolid Mexican operator had dismounted to confer with Pat.

And instantly Marjorie forgave money, loved and trusted it again, seeing all this lustrous sexy powerful machinery marshaled to money's will. And just look at that cleanness and order it had created. Where there had been tangle and dirtiness and trash before, was now clean bare dirt, reddish in the rising light, beside the columned trees.

Pat stepped smiling out to the road. "Good morning! You look radiant!"

"I look that tired, huh?"

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"Nothing some Espresso Buono won't fix when we head out of here. I didn't expect you'd actually come out."

They hadn't been able to make yesterday's date, Marjorie going instead to make her report to the police, but they'd agreed she might meet him for this morning's early business. Why exactly had she come? "I figured," she said sweetly, "that if we grabbed a date this early, we'd actually get to see each other."

He nodded, but added, "Did you have the thought that Larken might show up?"

"Yeah. You've had the thought too?"

"I guess I have. Look, pull off into that drive down there. This won't take half an hour. Come watch this Nipponese brute do its stuff."

She pulled off about a hundred feet downroad, in the driveway of the fieldhands' little house. As she parked she saw Pat in her rearview, lifting his arm in greeting to someone beyond him. She got out and saw, about a hundred feet uproad of Pat, Carl Larken come coasting on his bike, one bandaged hand raised in salute.

He dismounted still a little distance off, leaned his bike on a tree, and began walking toward the men and their machine.

Marjorie had to gather herself a moment before approaching. She must tell Carl simply and honestly about the report she'd made. It was not, after all, a criminal matter, but there would have to be discussions with the police. There were accountability issues here. She began to walk toward them, had taken three steps, when she felt a wave of nausea move up into her through her legs.

She froze, utterly disoriented by the sensation. The ground beneath her feet was...feeding terror up into her body. She stood, almost comically arrested in midstride. What was this panic crawling out of the Earth? It had something to do with Carl Larken down there, approaching the men from the opposite direction, something to do with the impact of his feet on the fresh-scraped earth.

Look at his slow liquid gait, all muscle up his legs and arms. He was so *here*, he pressed with impossible mass against the Earth. Suddenly all this regimented greenery, this whole army of rank-and-file vegetation, seemed to belong to him, while Pat and his helper and their bright machine had a slightly startled, caught-in-the-act air.

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Marjorie gripped the trunk of a eucalyptus, but even the hugeness of the tree against her felt flimsy in this radioactive sleet of fear that was blazing from the ground beneath them both.

Pat and the operator stood slack-shouldered beside the red steel monster. Larken came to within fifteen feet or so, and stopped. It seemed to Marjorie, even at her little distance, that the mass of him dented the Earth, putting the two lighter men in danger of falling toward him. His voice was gentle.

"Good Morning, Mr. Bonds. Señor." A faint smile for the operator. "I'm really sorry to intrude. I have to make use of this...land you own. It is a purely ceremonial thing, and executed in mere moments. Would you bear with me, Mr. Bonds? Indulge an addled old pedagogue for just a moment?"

"You say you want to perform a *ceremony*, Mr. Larken?" It was odd how much frailer Pat's voice sounded than Larken's. The idling earthmover half-drowned him out with a surge in its engine's rumble.

"A simple ceremony, Mr. Bonds. An offering, plainly and briefly made."

"You want to do it...in that shed?" Again the earthmover seemed to half-erase Pat's words, his little laugh at the strangeness of his own question.

"This spot of earth, right here, is all I need. The god I'm praying to is here, right underfoot of us."

The man's utter madness was out, it loomed before them now. But in that moment it was the others who seemed unreal to Marjorie. Hugging her tree, melted by her terror out of any shape to act, she found Pat and the operator, the Jeep and the dozer, all too garish to be real — like bright balloons, all of them, taut, weightless, flimsy. Pat, helpless before this perfect nonsense, made a gesture of permission that was oddly priestlike — an opening-out of hands and arms.

Larken unslung a small knapsack, and cupped it in both hands before him, tilted his head back slightly, his eyes searching inwardly. Marjorie, stuck like lichen to that trunk, a limbless shape, a pair of eyes only and a heart with the earthquake-awe in it — Marjorie understood that the strange man was searching for the right words. Understood too now that it was the rumbling of that dozer's engine that was awakening the earthquake underfoot.

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He chose his words. "I have been your faithful seeker, your faithful servant, forsaking all others! All others! I make you now your commanded offering. Open to me now the gates of eternity!"

He opened the knapsack, lifted it high, and sent its contents tumbling down through the silver air — two pale spheroids, two human heads, jouncing so vividly on the ground, their short-barbered hair looking surreally neat against the red dirt, their black-scabbed stumps glossy as lacquer.

Their impact with the earth set off the earthquake. There was a shrieking of metal as the backhoe flung its great arm in the air, a gesture galvanic as some colossal scorpion's. The whole machine came apart with the fury of this straightening, the steel sinews spraying asunder in red shards, and revealing a darker sinew within, a huge, black hatchling of tarry muscle clotted on long bone. Two crimson eyes blazed above its black snout, as its crooked paw, prehensile, seized Pat and the operator together. The men cried out, their bones breaking in the grip that lifted them up to the mad red moons of eyes, lifted them higher still, and flung them powerfully at the earth. They struck the ground, impossibly flattened by the impact, transformed, in fact, to roadkill, to sprawling husks of human beings, bony silhouettes postured as if they were running full tilt toward the core of the planet.

"Thank you! Thank you! Oh thank you!" Larken's gratitude sounded as wild as grief — his wail brought the god's paw down to him in turn. In turn he was seized up and lofted high, and was held aloft a moment while the god's eyes bathed him in their scarlet radiation.

And Marjorie, who had not guessed that she had voice left in her, screamed, and screamed again, because the earth beside the monster was no longer earth, but was a ragged-edged chasm of blackness, an infinite cauldron of darkness and stars.

The brute god held Larken high above this abyss. She could make out his face clearly above the crooked claw that gripped him — he was weeping with wonder and awe.

The god flung him down. His arms windmilling, down Larken plunged. The god gave one furious snort that wafted like roadkill through the morning air, and leapt after his acolyte, dwindling down toward the starfields.

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The earth closed over them, and Marjorie hugged the tree, quivering, staring at that resealed earth. The soil seemed sneakily transparent, thinly buried stars trying to burn through it like diamond drill bits. The planet felt hollow underfoot, and the great tree sustaining her seemed to feel it, too. They huddled together, feeling the ground resonate under them, like the deck of a ship on a rolling sea.

She straightened and started forward, a starship traveler negotiating the gravity of an alien world. The ship had crashed...there were the twisted shards of bright red metal...right here was where it had happened, the red dirt solid now, supporting her, supporting the black-stumped heads like thrown dice, their dulled snake-eyes aimed askew of one another, looking in different directions for the sane Earth they had known, she had known....

The sane world lay that way, didn't it? Down this narrow country road she could find her way back to freeway on-ramps that channeled predictably to shopping malls that sold fancy underwear and barrels of jellybeans, to Humanity Inc. with its computers and telephones and case-files full of muddled souls with painful childhoods and histories of run-ins with the law....

But how could the road lead there from such a starting point as this, here on the margin of the asphalt? These two sprawled human husks? She gazed on the distorted profile of Pat Bonds, crushed bone clad in sunbaked parchment. Older than Egypt he looked, the eye a glazed clot of mucus, a canted half-grin of teeth erupting from the leathery cheek. Crazed Cubist face, yet so expressive. He stared with outrage, with furious protest, at eternity.

Go back down this road. Take the first step, and the next will follow...see? Now the next. You're doing fine, Marjorie. Soon you'll reach your car, your car will reach the city. Just keep moving. It'll all come back to you....

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE!

I'D LIKE TO see someone give the Walt Disney Company a major environmental award. No other company can even come close to its brilliant job of recycling movie material. From its earliest days, when it really was under the leadership of Uncle Walt, the studio learned to reduce the need for full-fledged writing by reusing fairy tales (*Snow White*, ad nauseum) and children's classics (*Pinocchio*, *Winnie the Pooh*, etc.) for the basis of its films. But over the years, the company has become even more adept at salvage work.

Disney got into sequels and big screen/little screen cross-pollination before any of the other studios even had a clue about how profitable such antics could be. Under their various banners, they have remade "classic" movies galore, sometimes finding astounding success (*Father of the Bride*), and sometimes meeting deserved derision (*Born Yesterday*). They've updated Shakespeare into teen movies (for example, *10 Things I Hate About You*) and ripped off — for a fee, of course — a great many foreign movies they had reason to believe Americans wouldn't realize were remakes (*Three Men & A Baby*, *Just Visiting*, *The Associate*, *Jungle 2 Jungle*, et al.)

In a few cases, they took the time to change the name of a remake (hence 1961's *The Absent-Minded Professor* became 1997's *Flubber*). But branding doesn't do you much good if you don't take advantage of name recognition, so most Disney remakes have kept their original titles. To mix it up a little, the House of Mouse instead

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takes the material from one medium to another. Why not take an animated film and turn it into a live action comedy (as in *101* and *102 Dalmatians*)? Or, be really bold, and turn your feature cartoon into a Broadway musical or a traveling ice show *(Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King)*. Then there's the most astounding act of cinematic recycling yet — the transformation of a Disney amusement park ride, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, into one of the hit movies of the summer.

You get the idea. Outside of the folks at Disney's Pixar and Miramax partners, Disney executives shudder at the idea of even approximating an original cinematic idea. And yet, as much as I have railed against sequelitis and other Hollywood maladies, I'm here to tell you that remakes aren't always a bad idea.

Case in point is a little children's novel by Mary Rodgers called *Freaky Friday*. Disney has filmed this particular story not once, not twice, but three times. And if practice doesn't make perfect, it is at least capable of producing an amiable and entertaining family-style fantasy film.

The original *Freaky Friday* (1976) has retained a certain cult video following over the years as an example of Jodie Foster's early oeuvre. With a screenplay by Rodgers herself, it is (not surprisingly) fairly faithful to the novel. A harried homemaker named Ellen Andrews (Barbara Harris) is exasperated by her pubescent daughter, Annabel (Foster), who in turn feels equally plagued by her mother's preaching about room neatness and a healthy diet. As each mutters about wishing that they could switch places for just one day, an unexplained cosmic event grants their wish — and wacky antics ensue.

Since Disney is all for a good moral-of-the-story, the movie shows Harris's teeny-bopper flipping out over wrangling household staff, and performing laundry and cooking chores. Likewise, Jodie's hausfrau is horrified by the need to play sports again. (She loses a big field hockey game by scoring a goal for the opposition.) Both suffer from the shock of having to live one another's lives, and in so doing, mother and daughter gain a new appreciation for one another's efforts and talents. (And since this is retrograde Disney, most of the newfound appreciation emanates from girl toward Mom.)

It is always mildly diverting to watch Disney try to be hip and at

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the same time reinforce traditional values. In the original *Freaky Friday* flick, the Dad of the family (played, in an odd casting choice, by John Astin) is acknowledged by both mother and daughter to be a "male chauvinist pig." But you can bet your well-appointed suburban tract home that the movie will in no way suggest that the piggy papa should change his ways. And since Disney movies of this period also have a thing for strange flying events, Mom doesn't tool around in an airborne VW or Model T, but instead takes a terrifying but ultimately triumphant hang-glide above her husband's PR event.

It's fun to see young Jodie in her tomboy phase. But, otherwise, the only significance of *Freaky Friday* is that it seems to have spawned a passel of TV and feature films containing familial body-switches. Some of these include *Summer Switch* (1983, also from a Rodgers story — this time about the father and son of the clan), *Like Father, Like Son* (1987), *Vice Versa* (1988, also father-son switch), and the grandpa-grandson switcheroo, *18 Again!* (1988).

None of the aforementioned — you may be surprised to learn — were produced by Disney. But that doesn't mean that Walt's boys weren't looking to reuse their own property. During a time when Disney was producing Disney Family Movies on ABC, they decided to give Rodgers's story another go. And so a TV film, directed by Melanie Mayron and written by Stu Krieger, was produced, with Shelley Long and Gaby Hoffman in the mother-daughter roles. It was called *Freaky Friday*. And just to show that Disney knows how to (almost) move with the times, by 1995 Mom was a harried businesswoman working outside the home.

You'd think that dudes of the Magic Kingdom would have considered that particular story exhausted of its filmic possibilities. But if you think that, you don't know Disney. After the dawn of the new millennium, plans were made to bring *Freaky Friday* to the screen yet again. Writing honors went to comedy veteran Leslie Dixon and hot young writer Heather Hach. In a surprise helming move, Disney hired Mark Waters to direct. Waters was an indie darling for his debut feature, *The House of Yes* (1997) and an outcast for his very unfunny Hollywood romantic comedy debut, *Head Over Heels* (2001). Not exactly the obvious choice for the family fun of a Disney remake of a remake.

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And in another surprise, the actress hired to play the latest incarnation of the stressed mother, Annette Bening, bailed on the project just days before production was to begin.

A tired retread that a well-paid lead actor walks away from? Doesn't sound like screen magic in the making. But darned if Mr. Waters and his writers didn't pull it off. With a lot of help from a pinch-hitting Mom and a teenage Disney remake veteran.

Jamie Lee Curtis is the woman who took over the role of *Freaky Friday*'s mom, and it's hard to picture an actor more perfect for the role. Curtis has always been gorgeous and sexy, but also very authentic, and more than willing to make a fool of herself. (Jamie Lee's in-her-undies-with-no-makeup shoot for *More* magazine last year is proof positive of this.) Moreover, there is something very vital and eternally youthful about Ms. Curtis. When she (supposedly occupied by her daughter's persona) makes goo-goo eyes at a high school hottie played by Chad Michael Murray, we are not at all surprised when the young man makes goo-goo eyes back. Who wouldn't be smitten by Jamie Lee?

Curtis is also good in her adult role as Tess Coleman, the widowed and overextended psychotherapist and author coping with client anxieties and her children's concerns, all the while planning her re-marriage to a sensitive new-age (and underwritten) guy played by Mark Harmon. But Curtis only plays the very adult Tess for a few scenes at the beginning and end of *Freaky Friday*. The rest of the time that role is played by an actor of equal charm and talent, Ms. Lindsay Lohan.

At the tender age of seventeen, Lohan is an old hand at both remaking Disney family comedies and playing dual roles. She earned her stripes doing a 1998 remake of the Hayley Mills 1961 Disney favorite *The Parent Trap*. Five years ago, she played identical twins separated at birth — one of whom speaks with a British accent! Compared to that, playing a frazzled middle-aged woman was a piece of cake. Or at least young Lindsay makes it look effortless.

With two strong leads in the mother-daughter roles, all the filmmakers needed to do was give their actors something interesting to do. Waters and his writers actually managed this incredible feat. Wisely, they minimized the sentimental until the last couple of

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scenes, and even more prudently, they jettisoned the zany stuntwork altogether. The comedy in this *Freaky Friday* works because we are given a chance to see the two women live in one another's skins while coping with semi-believable situations. There are pratfalls and double takes, but the action never strays into the preposterous... except for the basic fantasy conceit of the plotline. (And fantasy works best when it is grounded in some kind of reality.)

As for the cosmic body-switch, this time out it seems to have something to do with an old Chinese restaurateur (Lucille Soong) and her mystical fortune cookies. I could have done without this particular bit of "updating," I must say. To see a wonderful actor like Rosalind Chao playing Pei-Pei, the old cookie-giver's daughter, as a goofy, grasping Chinese stereotype was not my favorite part of the film. And part of me wishes the film could have been a little riskier with the implications — sexual and otherwise — of an intriguing mother-daughter body switch.

But, heck, if it went to the really scary and thought-provoking places, it wouldn't be a Disney film. Studio Mouseketeers may update the slang and the motherly occupation in one of their remakes, and they may even transform a tomboy jock daughter into an alt-rocker wannabe. But a Disney film is just not designed to challenge a viewer in any significant way. Besides simple corporate greed and lack of imagination, there might actually be a rhyme and a reason for Disney's penchant for recycling old material. There *is* comfort and continuity in the familiar, after all. And as long as a retelling of a recognizable story has enough freshness and energy to charm us anew, that may be all an audience needs. Or, at least all they can hope for.

In the case of 2003's *Freaky Friday*, Disney has proven that three times really is the charm. This is the best telling yet of an old familiar body-switch tale. For many of the world's more discriminating moviegoers, that just won't be good enough. As for me, I was happy in this case to enjoy the performances of Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan in a Disney refurbishing of yet another one of their dusted-off properties.

Meanwhile, while we weren't looking, Disney has recycled *Tron* (1982) into a video game called Tron 2.0. "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" — they're words to live (and make a profit) by! ☙

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"Space: The Final Frontier." How many times have those words echoed in our heads over the past decades? But oftentimes it seems we've forgotten just how hard frontier life can be. Here's a story about hard living and some of the rewards to be had on the frontier.

The Seal Hunter

By Charles Coleman Finlay

WHEN THE ICE VEIN BLED dry at its capillary end, the rockers brought in their big equipment to bust it open for use as another farm tunnel. Their big equipment consisted of secondhand castoffs and other junk from the outer satellites, so Broadnax wasn't surprised when the borer broke down again, grinding work to a halt.

While the rest of the crew disassembled the motor, he turned uptunnel toward the airlock. This deep inside Troilus the spin-gravity was less than a third gee. Realizing that he moved opposite the asteroid's spin, he sprinted and launched himself over some tools blocking the tunnel floor. He folded his arms and floated for a moment, suspended in midair.

An appreciative whistle sounded over the com, followed by a young woman's buoyant voice. "Showoff."

He opened his arms and legs to land but miscalculated his position and touched a wall. The contact tumbled him hard to his knees.

The woman laughed at him. "You all right?"

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"Yeah," he said as he stood. He couldn't help grinning at his own inability to resist stupid temptations.

Sue-sheila Andy grinned back at him. She was a few good years past puberty, wasp-waisted, still a little bony where she needed curves. New to the tunnel crew — she'd been running the centrifuge, taking care of chicks down in the hatchery before. She was supposed to be sealing the walls, but it was pretty clear that task bored her. That was her equipment he'd jumped. Judging from the way she was closing a locker, she'd been playing games or doing something else instead. Wouldn't be too long before she wanted to have a baby, he guessed. She seemed like that type. Eager to be growing up, to be doing something — anything — new. He'd been there.

"So what do we have?" She tipped her helmet toward the end of the tube where the borer sat idle.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Looks like we have a really big hammer. And not enough room to swing it."

She laughed a second time, stopped, then tilted her head again. "Do you think it's the ghost?"

Raymont McAfee, another one of the rockers, had been crushed to death a week before, pinned between the borer and the wall when a mooring broke. Took him a while to die. All the little breakdowns since then had been blamed on his ghost tinkering with the equipment.

"That borer's old and buggy," Broadnax said. He'd been at McAfee's side while he died and hadn't been able to do anything to help him. "Doesn't mean there's a ghost."

"Maybe," she said. "Have they burned him yet?"

Rockers burned their dead and scattered the ashes in space. It was bad luck having uneasy souls around an asteroid.

"Yeah." Broadnax really didn't want to talk about it. He held up his hands to show the dumb-gloves, though she could see he wasn't wearing any memory. "Listen, can you tell me what the food stock looks like? With another delay?"

As she tapped out the request on her palm, a graph flashed into brief existence on her monocle. "Still holding at eighty-eight percent of sustenance. At least until the ship arrives."

Which was three months off, when their orbit intersected the Martian

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transports. If they came. The transports hadn't come on the last go-round, which was the source of the rockers' current troubles.

"Is that with McAfee's portion divided?" he asked.

"Sure. But divided over seven hundred people — "

It was more than that, 732, almost five percent more: Broadnax frowned at the down-rounding.

" — it's only a few more beans in every bowl of soup."

"You don't want your beans, I'll take 'em."

Her smile flashed as if he were joking. She hesitated, then raised a glove to her helmet, traced a seam, and bent toward him. She had something she wanted to say off-com, even if nobody else was listening in on their channel.

He stepped closer and she leaned up until their faceplates kissed. Strands of thick black hair were plastered on her cheek. She licked her lips.

"Hey, it's my turn to have the new vivid — "

"That historical one?"

"Yeah, that one. About Earth, sunside, but with air. You want to come by and watch it with my family later?" Her courage all used up, she dropped her eyes and her voice faltered. "I mean if you haven't seen it — "

"I haven't seen it."

When she released a quick little sigh of relief, he smiled for her. She really was very pretty.

"Hey." He had an impulse. "I'm scheduled to take the shuttle out for the garbage dump shift after this. It's a short run. But sometimes they get longer."

The overhead lights gleamed in her dark, uncertain eyes.

"You see what I'm saying?"

"I guess," she said.

"Well. You got anywhere else you're supposed to be?"

Her head twitched back, but not enough to break the contact between the helmets.

"Oh, don't worry about it." He stepped back and spoke over the public channel. "Maybe I'll come by to watch the vivid."

She reached for his arm and he paused. The helmets clicked like teeth as they touched again — some atmosphere leaked into the tunnel, a few

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millibars to check for seepage, enough for sound to travel. "So if I wanted to meet you — ?"

"At the shuttle. If you wanted."

"Maybe I do. When did you say?"

"Next shift at thirteen hours."

She bit her lip. "Is that all you came looking for?"

"Nah," he said, yanking a sonic hammer out of the tool locker. He mimed busting out a few chunks of rock around the borer. "But I'm glad I found it."

He turned and headed back down tunnel, hammer swinging at the end of his arm.

"That's not going to do much good," she said over the com, a little bounce back in her voice.

He didn't look back. "Some good is better than none."

BACK IN HIS DARKENED quarters a few hours later, Broadnax lay sore and exhausted with his baby daughter Maya snuggled in the pouch on his chest. Her fist pressed against her mouth. Only a few months old, she weighed less than the sonic hammer but felt so much heavier. A greenish stain marked Broadnax's shirt where she'd spit up most of her daily allowance plus the twelve percent made up out of his own share.

He leaned forward and rubbed his nose against her head, smelling the algae protein from her formula. The soft texture of her tiny black curls brushed the back of his good hand, the left one. She grunted and stirred, so he nudged the wall to rock the hammock. The motion soothed her. And him. He didn't think he'd been sleeping until the door slammed opened and the lights shot up.

"Hell," muttered an exhausted voice, directed at nothing in particular — Kayla, his wife, in from sunside. She saw him and dimmed the lights again.

"What's wrong?" Broadnax asked.

"What's right?" She stripped to her underwear, balling up her pants and hurling them in the corner. Even in the shadows, she looked as thin and tough as carbon-fiber cable. She was a few years older than Sue-sheila, a few years younger than Broadnax. "The solar scoops are all working

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again, but we had to rebuild one of the stabilizers. Not sure how long it'll last. How's Maya?"

"Fine," he said, nuzzling his daughter's tiny head again. The lights hadn't bothered her. "Any word from Aeneas?"

"Yeah, we fixed the dish too, first thing. I forgot. They lost their goat pharm last year — "

"'Lost,'" Broadnax muttered, disbelieving.

" — and want to trade us for antibiotics. Apparently they've got some new infection going around."

"What're they offering?"

"Algae, lemons, basic stuff." She washed her face and arms while they talked, wetting a rag at the kitchen tap — the bathroom they shared was down-tunnel.

"It's not worth it," he said. "The goats don't have milk right now anyway because their rations were cut way back. Bet it'd take more to get them to produce than we'd get in trade."

"Yeah, but we'll have to do it if the infection is life-threatening. We sent back asking them for more specifics."

She toweled off with her dirty shirt, tossed it down too, and glided over to the hammock. As she bent over, Broadnax lifted his head up to meet her. She leaned past him to kiss the baby. Lips pursed, she blew him a kiss as she stood up.

"I need to sleep," she said, shooting over to the bedroom door and yanking it open.

He twisted a second too late. "Wait — "

A voice yelled in the other room.

Kayla slammed the door and Maya jerked awake, big eyes darting around.

Broadnax spoke softly as he rubbed his daughter's back. "Trey Robinson needed a place to crash while we're finishing the repairs to Droop Tunnel. We were coming up on the quarters rotation, so I — "

"No, it's okay," she said, exhaling. She cracked the door. "Sorry 'bout that, Trey."

"S'okay," came the sleepy voice. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"Neither did I," she said, closing the door.

"I stayed out here so I could tell you when you came in," Broadnax

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said. "Instead of you walking right in on him sleeping in the hammock. Guess I fell asleep."

She plopped down cross-legged and leaned against the wall beside the ceiling-high tomato plant. "It's okay. It'll get better soon. The Evanses are packing up, all of them, and flying for Callisto when it comes out from behind."

"Things ain't no better on Callisto."

"Can't tell her that. Anyway, it'll give us a little more room to squeeze by until the transports come."

If they came. Broadnax didn't say that, though.

She was picking through the plant for a nearly ripe tomato they'd been watching for a couple days. Her shoulders knotted. "Did you eat it?"

He hadn't, but he hadn't told Trey not to either. Still, that was a dustsucker thing for Trey to do and he'd have to settle it with him later. "Sorry. There's another one'll be ripe in a day or two, if you look down there on the left."

"Yeah, I see it." Her head sagged.

He slid out of the hammock onto the floor. Maya's tiny hand pinched the skin of his throat as she held on tight. "Here you go," he said, patting the cushions.

Kayla climbed inside and rolled herself up in the blankets without talking to him, then buried her face in the pillow and pretended to be asleep. Maybe she already was. She'd been tired constantly ever since having the baby. But things had been rough between them before that. Had always been rough.

Maya sucked greedily on her thumb while Broadnax held her tight to his big shoulder, rocking her in the dark.

The surface shuttle dock was a long insulated berm terminal with dozens of flextube airlocks staggered up one side. Broadnax arrived early to load and check his shuttle, then came back out to the corridor to wait.

Huge fans rattled overhead, stirring the thin air and making him uncomfortable. Laughter echoed at the far end as a crew of Kayla's coworkers came in from sunside maintenance and hurried downshaft. He couldn't blame them. If the spin-gravity was low down deep, up here it was gee plus. But that wasn't the only thing weighing on him.

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He had just about decided to make the run alone when Sue-sheila hopped off the lift, glanced around to see if anyone saw her, then hurried over to his side.

She wore her usual clothes, blues and grays, nothing special Broadnax noticed about them. But she had scrubbed her skin until it gleamed and had glossed her lips with something. Even her computer monocle looked a little less dingy than normal.

"You look nice," he said.

She stared at his face to see if he was mocking her; words faltered on her pretty mouth. "I — "

"No, you do." He indicated the flextube. "Let's go.

She brushed against him on her way into the tube, and he caught his breath at her touch. Picking up a last canister, he followed her. The tube sagged under his weight.

He entered the craft, sphinctered the airlock shut, and hit the keys that undid the clamps. Sue-sheila waited nervously in the cramped middeck behind the seats.

"You want payload or pilot?" he asked.

"Payload," she said quickly. He gestured for her to take the seat slightly back and to the left. He ducked his head and squeezed into the right seat, loosely tucking the canister under the strap beside him.

"You read the checklist," he said. She didn't know where to find it, so he showed her how to pull it up.

"CO_2 scrubbers?" she asked, voice wavering.

"Exchanged."

"Fuel cells?"

"Purged."

"Inertial measurement unit?"

He answered her all the way down the list, checking his own calculations again at the same time and setting everything for launch. When she came to the end, he said, "You forgot to ask about food rations."

Her face registered confusion, flashed fear, whipped back to the list. "But it's not on here."

"Never is, but you always ask."

"But we're only flying out for — " Her voice was rising in protest.

"You always ask," he repeated firmly.

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She slouched in her chair. "Okay, then — got any food rations?"

"Enough for a couple days," he said, "long as we don't eat anything." He leaned back to catch her eye and share a smile, but she was too flustered to notice. "Look, it's not on the list because you can answer no and still take off, depending on where you're flying to. But you always ask. That's something you need to know."

"Oh."

He commenced the launch sequence, counting down the final seconds aloud the way he learned as a kid. "Ten rings of Saturn, nine rings of Saturn, eight rings — "

"I didn't sign out," she said. "Did you sign us out?"

He watched the rest of the ticks click away. The thrusters boosted and they lifted off. "Well, if I did that they might look for us back at a certain time," he said. "Did you tell anyone where you were going?"

"No."

"I didn't tell anyone where you were going either."

She wiped her palms on her thighs and smiled at him, a little nervously.

He concentrated on the controls, doing everything slowly and deliberately, setting an example for her. Troilus dropped below them, the sunburned boulders poking up brown through the gray regolith. They flew over Buckshot Crater — Broadnax always thought that was a stupid name, since it was a smooth circular plain covered with a lot of tiny craters — then they were up and away from the surface completely. He turned the shuttle as they boosted and they glimpsed the solar scoops spread out like the petals of a flower, spinning the asteroid like a pinwheel in the star-spangled sky. His stomach hiphopped with the shift to weightlessness.

Sue-sheila pressed against the bugeye window, staring. When she noticed Broadnax noticing her, she leaned back in her seat and feigned boredom.

"How you like tunnel busting so far?" he asked.

"Oh, it's better than the hatchery."

"Uh-huh," he said encouragingly.

"They let me pick out the new rooster, just before I left." She leaned forward, eyes glinting. "The new cock. Did you know that's what roosters are called? Cocks."

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"Uh-huh."

"So I got to pick the new cock."

After a bit of silence while he finished setting in their course, he said, "Tough choice?"

She stared at him waiting for more of a reaction, then leaned back in her seat and acted bored again. "Nah. We have to do it after so many generations just to keep genetic diversity in the fertile eggs. So we tested a bunch, found some males, and I picked one."

"You have any practice flying one of these?" he asked.

"Yeah!" She snapped upright. "I mean, on the simulator."

"Take the console," he told her, flipping the controls over to the payload seat's joystick. "Simulator's more interesting. Stuff goes wrong there."

The shuttle's computer compensated for normal course deviations at regular intervals but she took the joystick and fingered the keys, making constant awkward little adjustments to keep them tightly on course. He let her do it for a while, answering her questions about reading the charts, and watching her attention focus on it until she grew frustrated.

"How come — ?" She made a fist and punched her seat.

"Look, just enter the coordinates and let it go," he said, switching the controls back to his seat and taking his hand off the joystick. "Like this. Computer makes the minor course adjustments on its own. You don't really need to do anything unless you change the destination."

"But in the simulator — "

"Yeah, I know, but we burn real fuel, okay?"

"Okay." She pouted as if he should have told her that instead of letting her learn it for herself. Her head turned. "What's that?"

The canister Broadnax brought aboard was floating loose in the zero gee — he must not have fastened it down tightly enough. Sue-sheila grabbed it out of the air.

He paused a moment before deciding to answer. "McAfee."

"What?" She shoved it away. "You mean, his ashes?"

"Yeah. Or maybe his ghost that's been busting up the equipment." He caught the canister and wedged it tighter between the bolts and belt knobs of his seat before strapping it down again.

"I thought he was your friend."

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"He was a hard guy to get along with," Broadnax said.

"The two of you went all the way to Mars once, didn't you?"

"Three of us. Me, McAfee, and Seema Gamble."

"Oh, I remember her. What happened to her?"

Broadnax scrolled over the local space maps, slotting in his own chips to make some comparisons. Sue-sheila adjusted her breasts in her shirt and stretched her collar a bit. He didn't watch her but he didn't pretend not to notice either. "She decided not to come back," he said finally.

"Who can blame her?" Sue-sheila laughed at the idea. "Wouldn't you go there again?"

"It was hard there. Domes with thousands and *thousands* of people, no way to know them all, strangers always looking to rob you. No crew to work with where everybody shares alike, always somebody telling you what to do and how to do it." That thought seemed to sober her up a bit. He considered mentioning the way Seema had gotten hooked on dust. The back of his hand rubbed across his dry mouth. "But yeah, she stayed there."

She tipped her nose at his right arm. The synth-skin was silver right up to the elbow where it blended into his own dark arm. "Why didn't you get that pigmented?" she asked.

"Didn't seem important." He'd lost the arm six months ago in a tunnel accident a lot like the one that had killed McAfee. It still didn't feel quite like his own arm. The hand held onto things too tightly, though he'd had the neural connectors checked and rechecked and recalibrated them every few shifts to acquire new muscle memory. "Besides," he added, "I would have had to wait a couple extra days for the match and the crew was already running short. It's nothing, just skin."

"My mom took me to Callisto one time, when Ashvinni" — her little brother — "was sick."

Broadnax remembered that. She'd been about ten years old. Her brother did work down in the hydroponics farms now, mostly running the scummers.

"We saw a guy there who'd hurt both his legs in an explosive decompression accident. He was in the clinic with my brother. Both his legs were all, you know, black — "

"Necrotic?"

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" — yeah, whatever, but more like they were all dead and stuff. He was out in vacuum and his suit ruptured and the auto-clamps tourniquetted — "

Broadnax frowned.

" — his legs to save him. They were pretty tore up anyway, from the same thing that ripped his suit. They gave him two new legs but they had a hard time matching his skin color. He had this weird pale pinkish skin."

"Uh-huh," he said. "Like Kangas?" Kangas was a guy who kept to himself, worked mostly in vent systems.

"Yeah! Like him, pink like that. Anyway the silver kept showing through."

"Huh. I hate tourniquet suits."

"That what happened to your arm? I thought it got crushed." She reached out to touch his arm.

Broadnax tensed. She pulled her hand back.

"Yeah, the borer crushed it," he said. "Anyway, that's why I don't believe in no ghost. We had stuff breaking down long before that stupid McAfee went and got himself killed."

A little line folded in the middle of her forehead. "I thought this was going to be fun. But sometimes you're as cold as rock."

He turned his face away from her and mumbled, "I can get pretty hot too sometimes."

She slouched in her seat and sulked at him with her glistening lower lip thrust out. He didn't say another thing to her until they reached the dropoff point. Troilus's garbage was all the stuff that couldn't be recycled: heavy metals, radioactives, contaminated organics. Not much, a load every few months. He'd volunteered for the trash run just like he offered to take care of McAfee's remains. He unbelted himself, popped one of the suction cup handholds off the wall, and pushed over to the little middeck area that opened behind the seats.

She twisted around to look at him. "You want the canister?"

"No. McAfee could be a pain, but he's not trash."

Applying the suction cup to the wall for leverage, he pulled open the shuttle's sleeping bunk, a hammock stretched in front of the locker wall. The trash was stored in a body-ball, the kind they used for life-rafts, decompression accidents, that sort of thing. Too big to fit in the lockers. They used a damaged one, with disabled life support, for the trash.

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Broadnax checked that the contamination lights were on, the "do not pick up" beacon was beeping, and the telemetry broadcasting "tomb" instead of "womb." Then he rolled it into the little airlock. His ears popped when he vacuumed the pressure back into the cabin. He left just enough in the lock to give the trash some outward momentum, then sphinctered the outer hull open. An alarm beeped.

"What'll happen to that?" Sue-sheila asked.

"If I got the coordinates right, it'll eventually drop into Jupiter's atmosphere. That bad boy's the biggest garbage dump in the solar system."

"Oh."

He retrieved the canister, took a roll of the heavy tape out of a locker, and opened the airlock. He attached the can to the floor — no need letting something that valuable go — then flipped open the lid so McAfee's remains could scatter.

Sue-sheila cringed as he closed the lock again and cycled most of the air out. "Won't his ashes just follow us back home?"

"Yeah, some of 'em, maybe," Broadnax said. "But the dead always follow you around, can't do much about it."

He opened the other side of the lock and said his silent farewell to McAfee. That was all there was to it. No ceremony, at least no more than a few of them had in the common room a couple shifts back. He sighed as he slid back into his seat and brought up the course settings. He entered the new coordinates from his own charts and then burned a huge reserve of fuel to get them to maximum thrust.

"Guess we'll loop out past some other gravity wells before heading home, see if we can't lose him," he said.

"Where are we going?" Her voice wavered. She didn't look as pretty to him anymore. Too young, too much like Seema.

"Somewhere."

"I want to go back."

"What?" His voice sounded a lot angrier, more raw, than he intended. "You go climbing in a shuttle with some guy, don't hardly even know him, don't tell anyone where you are, and then think you can just change your mind?"

Her dark brown eyes widened, and her hands curled like claws. "Don't touch me."

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"I ain't touching you," he snapped. "But the next guy might not give you no choice. You hear what that group of dustsuckers from Patroclus did to Annie-pamela Nundy?"

"Yes!" She crossed her arms, curled her shoulders in, and scowled. "Who are you, anyway, my mom? That's like ancient history and anyway I didn't get in a shuttle with them."

He stared at the readings. They were heading off into a section of the belt where a lot of the minor bodies hadn't ever been properly charted, so he was setting up scans to add the data into his own charts. He double-checked the firewalls to make sure none of it leaked over into common memory.

"Listen," he said after a long while, his voice calmer. "I can tell that Troilus is too small for you. You want something else, you don't even know what, and someday you're going to get in a ship, anybody's ship, and fly off to Callisto or Titan or Mars or anywhere else at all just because you're bored, just because you have to get off this rock."

"God, whatever." She rolled her eyes.

"Fine, don't believe me. Forget I said anything about it." He didn't like the look of things outside. They weren't matching up with where he expected things to be. "But today you got in a shuttle with me, and now we're going to go someplace and when we get there, you're going to do exactly what I say."

"You can't make me do anything," she said.

She looked scared. He hoped she was.

"You think you're all grown up," he said, "you better start making some more grown-up decisions." He leaned his seat back as far as it would go and jerked his thumb toward the middeck. "You'll be better off sleeping in the bunk if you want to rest."

She glowered at him, seething anger. But she stayed in her seat.

He closed his eyes while she burned it out of her system.

She didn't speak to him later, after he woke, but she watched everything he did and he made sure he did everything in the open where she could watch him. All the tasks were things she should have known from the simulator.

The Trojan asteroid fields contained hundreds of planetismals, some of them, like Troilus, home to colonies; most of the field was mapped out

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in a general way, but there were plenty of small asteroids too little to take notice of. Some were no bigger than dust, some were a few kilometers in diameter. He breathed easier another hour later when one of the latter appeared in the forward porthole, an oblong star that grew brighter and brighter. He burst the brake thrusters to start decelerating.

He inventoried the med cabinet, double-checked all the control settings, and watched the clock. When the timer he'd set went off, he pulled down an oxygen mask, flipped the switches, and started breathing pure oxygen.

The first words she spoke to him, seeing the O_2 mask, were, "Is there something wrong?"

"Nope."

"Well, I hope you're breathing poison."

He grinned, liking her a little more again. In a sense, oxygen was poison. He didn't correct her.

"You locked me out of all the control systems," she said.

"Yeah, I did."

A little while later, she asked, "Where are we?"

He nodded at the speck of light ahead of them. "Almost where we're going."

Leaving the mask on his face, Broadnax unstrapped from the pilot's seat. Hooking his feet in the floor loops, he grabbed hold of the bands on the ceiling and began a set of vigorous crunches while controlling his breathing, checking his oxygenation.

"Uh, what are you doing now?" she asked.

"Warming up to rockwalk."

"What?" She shook her head. "You can't make me go outside."

"I ain't going to. Rockwalking's tricky. I need someone inside. Just in case."

"In case of what?"

"In case of nothing."

He finished his crunches, unhooked, and swung into the pilot's seat.

"What's out here that we don't have at home?" she asked.

Broadnax looped in tight around the asteroid, using its slight mass to help slow them down, saving a little more fuel for the trip back. "There, that's it."

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He hit the forward light and it played over the surface of the rock. Little bumps and craters cast shifting shadows as the light played over them. One shadow jerked opposite the others.

"What?" she said. "I don't see anything but raw rock."

"Tell you what I see: lysine, leucine, methionine — "

"Huh? Are you dusted?"

" — phenylalanine, valine, tryptophan — "

"What are you talking about?" Her voice was shrill.

"Essential amino acids. Protein. But the niacin is a nice little extra." She still looked at him all puzzled, so he said. "Down there. If you watch close, you might see one moving."

She leaned forward in her seat, then unbelted herself and pressed her face right up against the port glass.

"Wow!" she whispered. "It's, they really are — "

"Vacuum seals, yeah."

He squeezed in beside her and tried not to notice the smooth skin of her bare arm pressed against his. His eyes skimmed over the surface below them, picking out the darker oval shapes scattered on the rock. From up here, they were roughly the same color as the radiation-burned boulders on Troilus, only there was no regolith below — not enough gravity. His hand swung the light around while he tried to pick a spot smooth enough to land, close enough to what he'd come for to make it worth the trouble.

"My mom talks about them," Sue-sheila was saying, "about the beachheads of them on Troilus when they were first cracking the rock open. She said there were some as big as air mattresses."

"Huh," Broadnax said, flying the joystick left-handed to do one more loop. The rock wasn't that big. Maybe two kilometers lengthwise. "Biggest I ever seen anywhere was half that. They collapse when you bring them into any kind of air pressure though, lose maybe a third of their size."

"She says they taste pretty plain — "

"Yeah, not much flavor."

" — and the seals are best, but even, what do you call them, the shemps?"

"Shrimps."

"Yeah, shrimps, they aren't too bad, if you cook them right, she says."

"There are four sizes," Broadnax said. "Seals, pups, lobsters, and

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shrimps. Seems to be something to do with the length of their reproduction cycle, so you only see them in stages. Ain't much to lobsters and shrimps besides shell. But we ate them all. That was all that kept us going those first few years, while we busted open the rock."

He said "we," but it had been his folks. He'd been too small to work on the crews then, though there'd only been about a hundred people and he knew all of them and got to see the work they did. He remembered the shrimps tasting bland, but having an interesting texture. He'd been old enough to join the seal hunting crews that scoured the surface for the last of them. He and McAfee had worked on that crew together, the first time either one of them spent that much time sunside.

Her fingers clicked over her palm and lines of green text and images scrolled over her monocle.

"No, seriously. They're all gone, trailing," she said, meaning the asteroids trailing Jupiter. She stared out the port in disbelief. "There aren't supposed to be any more."

He knew what she knew, because they linked to the same common memory. "Well, here they are."

"But how?" She was bouncing around almost as much as her voice.

He selected a spot to land and guided the ship in. "I was making a run from," he was going to say Anaeas to Prairiedog, decided not to, "one place to another a couple years back along the usual route and decided about halfway there to go home instead. I rock-skipped my way through this sector and stumbled across this then."

"But it's not in my memory!" she said, staring at text, fingers jumping like mad.

"If I hadn't kept it to myself, they wouldn't be here now. You learn to keep some things to yourself if you want to make it," he said.

She wasn't paying attention. She'd reached the end of the information available on the seals and was already frustrated. "Do you think they were always here, maybe?"

"Dunno," he said. "They've found some traces of some kind of life pretty much everywhere in the solar system except Mercury and Pluto." He picked the exact spot to land, nudged the brake thrusters again. "And nobody's looked too hard at either of those."

"Well, it says here they're probably genetically engineered from the anaerobic Martian roaches, the ones sent out ahead of the colonists, before

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the terraforming. But nobody's sure."

"Did you know they were called cockroaches?"

She did, but he knew she did because he'd read it too. She blushed, which made him smile.

"*Cock*-roaches," he repeated, emphasizing the word just the way she had when she was talking about the roosters.

"Seems like it's all part of the post-Holocene species explosion," she said, blushing even more and acting like he hadn't said anything. "Probably seeded through the asteroid belt ahead of settlement."

"Well, settlement happened and they're pretty much extinct now." He touched the surface so lightly when he landed that she didn't even notice.

"Takes over a hundred years for them to grow to full — "

The whump of the anchor bolt firing into the rock surprised her into silence and she looked through her monocle at him.

"You don't have to come out there with me," he said. "Just stay in here, talk to me over the radio, answer any questions I have." He showed her the buttons. "I'm unlocking the controls now. If you decide to leave without me, this is how you retract the anchor."

She stared at him while he swung by the suction cups over to the lockers.

"I'm not going to do anything," she said.

He chose the lightweight suit, the thin one that they used for tunnel construction. It was quicker to put on and he'd take his chances with micrometeor tears and radiation — he wasn't going to be out there very long and he wanted maneuverability. Besides, he didn't like using the heavyweight gloves with his new hand yet. He had to fight the built-in servos too much.

She stared at him, her eyes almost as wide as when she'd first seen the seals. "You can't leave me — "

He snapped his helmet shut, muffling her voice.

" — here all by myself." Her elbows were in tight to her sides and her hands were fists.

"I'll be outside if you need me," he said. He grabbed a workbag full of clips, a hand drill, and a light as he stepped into the airlock over the empty canister. As he cycled the door shut, one of McAfee's ashes appeared in the air, whirling around, then coming to a dead step. Broadnax's ears popped.

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"You hear me?" he said over the radio.

"Yes," came the sullen reply. "I hate you!"

It clicked off.

She'd get over it. He'd make it up to her on the return flight. The lock opened and he stepped outside.

The shuttle's light flooded a sheet of white across the uneven rock. Every bump in the surface cast a shadow that went on forever. Rockwalking an asteroid this size, Broadnax knew it was a mistake to orient yourself as if there was a down: you had to treat a rock this small as if it was all wall. So instead of hopping down to the surface, and possibly skipping right off it into space, Broadnax swung out and grabbed the shuttle's handholds, pulling himself over the roof to reach the carbon-fiber towing cable. He attached the end-clip to his belt, unlocked the reel, and pulled to make sure it unrolled evenly.

"I'm hooked," he said over the radio.

No reply.

"Heading out now," he said.

He lowered himself to the surface and then sprawled out on it flat. Next to the shuttle, it gave him the odd sensation of crawling on the floor. With only a hundred fifty meters of tether, he needed to choose his direction carefully to get this done in one trip. Ahead of him and to the left, there was a bigger beachhead of seals. Although that beachhead was all sizes — seals, pups, lobsters — on the flyover, he'd seen more of the larger ones up and to the left, so he pulled himself hand over hand across the pitted stone in that direction.

"Coming up on the first beachhead," he said.

He glanced back to see how far he'd come, and the floor he'd been crawling across vertigoed into a wall with the shuttle a twenty-meter drop straight below him. Stupidly, he gazed into the light, almost blinding himself. Spots danced before his eyes as he squeezed them shut and turned away.

When he opened them again, he scanned the surface, trying to count the seals. Their dark backs gleamed black, shot with muted shades of red and brown and dull orange. Probably xanthophyll. They converted solar radiation into mass, while their weird undersurface of tiny double-chambered mouths took up minerals and raw carbons from the stones. According to common memory, they were only found in places with a

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deep regolith, but that obviously wasn't the case here. The world was full of surprises that way.

He didn't see any of the seals nearby, only pups. He picked out the biggest one along the edge and pulled himself toward it, reaching it sooner than —

"Hell!"

Sue-sheila didn't answer, and he didn't know if she was still listening, but he explained anyway.

"I had the scale all wrong. No way to tell. It was hard to see the shrimps on Troilus, we had to sift the regolith for them. The ones I thought were seals are only pups. And this pup is a lobster."

And the ones he thought were lobsters were only shrimps. Pretty new ones at that. Not much meat here. He'd have to work hard to make it worth the trip. Now that he had the scale of things, he scanned the surface, looking for anything with any size at all. The lobsters lay there mostly inert as he clambered over them to reach the nearest pup.

Taking the drill in his right hand, he punched a hole in the ridge of the carapace. The creature shivered slightly at the vibration. He fetched a clip from the bag, slipped it through the new hole, and attached it to the cable behind him.

"Okay," he said. "Got the first one."

Still no answer. She probably had turned the radio off in a fit of peeve. He crawled upwall to the next one, drilled and clipped it.

"Got number two."

He bypassed a bunch of lobsters and a small pup. He was out about sixty meters now already, but getting into the thick of them. The third one he drilled, he started the hole too low on the ridge and punctured the shell — he could tell when it pushed through without showing on the other side. He knew what was coming and flinched as he jerked the drill back.

The pup shrank by about a third of its size, and then, with its legs still kicking, folded inside out, vaporing its guts into the void.

What a waste. But no time to think about it.

On to the next one. He was sweating now; some had pooled in the nape of his neck, where it floated in the weightlessness, making him want to look over his shoulder constantly, as though someone were watching him. He drilled more carefully this time.

"Three."

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He settled into a rhythm. Crawl, drill, clip. Crawl, drill, clip. His own body blocked the ship's light now so that anything in front of him was in darkness. The lightweight suit didn't have a clamp to fix the handlight to, and he soon discovered that he couldn't hold onto the handlight, the drill, and the surface at the same time. He slipped the handlight in his hip bag while he worked, casting a net of shadows over everything it illuminated.

Crawl, drill, clip, search with the light, crawl, drill, clip. He finished that beachhead, saw he had fifty meters of cable left, and searched several minutes before selecting another direction.

There was still no answer from Sue-sheila, so he didn't ask her for help, just replayed the vid from the flyover on his faceplate and tried to guess where he was. When he finally picked a direction, he continued counting out loud for her.

"Sixteen."

"Twenty-seven."

He was running low on clips and had used half his oxygen. Everything was dark now. He looked back to locate the ship and saw only the long cable with its string of pups looping over the curved horizon. It didn't worry him — all he had to do was push off from the surface and rise into the night until he saw the ship, then pull himself in. But it made him notice the vast sea of space around him, and he thought about those transports from Mars that might or might not come again, and his daughter Maya, and Kayla's tomato plant. And he saw the cable again, all pups and not a single seal.

He turned back to his work, picking the pups more carefully, going a little further for the ones that appeared larger, until he had taken the cable out near its end. He was down to his last clip when he saw the seal. Seals. Two of them, in a little divot of rock. The second one was as big as an air mattress.

"Wow," he whispered to himself.

"Last two," he said aloud over the radio. He was panting. "Can't see much here, too dark. It'll take a bit."

Here's where having a partner up above running the light would've made things easier. That's how they'd done it when they scoured Troilus. It was only two seals though, two he hadn't seen on the flyover. He could toss off one of the pups and get them both.

Or he could unclip himself, attach the end of the line to the last one,

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and pull himself back to the ship hand over hand. Every little bit helped.

The smaller one was closer, so he crawled over and drilled it first. It took a long time to punch the bit through the shell. The carapace sloped down to an edge in front which they seemed to use to turn over the dust; this one had never done anything but scrape rock, and it looked sharp. The creature shuddered and clicked its legs rhythmically against the rock. When Broadnax clipped it to the cable, and twisted the light around, he saw that the bigger one had moved a meter away.

He climbed up to it.

"Last one," he said to the radio.

No mistaking the scale of this one — it was almost as long as he was, as big as an air mattress. Moving seemed to have exhausted it. It twitched docilely while he carefully drilled the hole through its ridge. He waited a moment, taking a few deep breaths, fighting his own exhaustion, then reached back with the drill still in his right hand and unclipped himself from the tether.

The seal lunged, butting against him.

He might have shouted something, but he didn't notice, too preoccupied by the way his world flipped again from wall to ceiling. He now dangled by one hand and all the universe gaped between his feet. The tether had slipped from his palm, but he still clutched the drill somehow. His legs twisted around in a slow spiral, disorienting him, tearing at his grip.

The seal hit him again. Fire tore through his arm and the air exploded out of his suit — the sharp edge of its shell had sliced it open.

He pounded his right fist into his stomach, just the way every rocker was trained as a toddler, forcing himself to exhale all his air. It gave him maybe forty or fifty extra seconds before he died. He saw the end of the cable and grabbed for it, even though there was no way he could pull himself back to the shuttle in time. He missed. His good arm already felt numb.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the seal move on the ceiling above him. His right hand still held tight to the drill. With his thumb pressing the on button, he jammed it into the gap behind the carapace ridge. It held and he pulled himself onto the creature's back.

It didn't like that at all, and jerked one way, then the other, more than he'd ever seen all the seals move in his life. Darkness flickered around the

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edges of his vision. He had maybe thirty seconds left.

The drill broke through, puncturing the shell.

The seal turned inside out, spraying a wombfull of shrimp into Broadnax's chest. The tiny black creatures filled the night around him, hundreds, maybe thousands of them. They were beautiful, some falling back to the rock, others flying weightless off into empty space in search of another rock to populate. One death, but countless new lives. It seemed fitting.

The impact had pushed him off the rock. As he lifted his head, he realized that he wasn't falling into bottomless space but rising toward a heaven filled with stars. His mouth worked, trying to tell Sue-sheila to get the string of pups back to Troilus to feed the others. He'd forgotten that the radio didn't work in vacuum, but he kept talking, repeating her name, her brother's, Maya's, Kayla's, everyone he could remember. One death, many lives. It would be okay. He'd done some good, all the good he could.

Glistening black shrimps rose around him and multiplied in the darkness of the sky, blotting out even the stars, swirling around and around until they became ash. Until they became McAfee's ashes.

The ashes grayed and took on McAfee's shape, the rounded slouch of his shoulders, his easy grin.

"It's good to see you," he told Broadnax.

"Aw, man, Mac," Broadnax said, and he wept.

McAfee's ghost reached out and clamped his icy hand over the slash in Broadnax's forearm, embracing Broadnax the same way he'd held McAfee at the end, and pulling him up toward the stars, into the center of them, to the Sun, which rose, burning away the blackness, growing until it filled the sky.

And Broadnax felt warmed by it. Soothed.

A hard knot of agony and cold.

The young woman's voice, insulated, far away. "You stupid, stupid dustsucker, I hate you, I *hate* you — "

Broadnax was in a pressurized body-ball in the mid-deck of the ship beside the airlock. For a split second, he wondered if it was set for tomb or womb.

"Did you save — ?" his voice croaked.

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Sue-sheila's face appeared at the little square window. She had her suit on, mask still up. "Yes, I saved your stupid bones. Barely."

That wasn't it. His knuckles bounced against his face. "The seals?"

She punched the side of the bag. "Those too."

"Let me out." He had to check on the string of seals, made sure she'd secured it right. He had to put the baby's formula in her bottle. He had to call up McAfee and tell him he was sorry about — no. Wait.

"Uh-uh," she said. Sighing. Standing back. "Sorry, little rooster. We're not cracking this egg until I get you home."

He didn't argue, not again, realizing what she'd done already. Instead, he curled up in the darkness of the ball, pressed the numb fist of his injured hand to his mouth, and thought of nothing at all.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

SAY THE WORD "prehistoric" and most people think first of dinosaurs or Neanderthals (naturally enough). But for several years now, Steven Utley has been spinning well-crafted tales of the Silurian Age to show us that trilobites and cephalopods have charm of their own, as do the people who research them. Next month we'll bring you a new one, "Invisible Kingdoms," a story of how the near future and the distant past collide. Don't miss this story.

The February issue will also include a new novelet by Robert Reed, "River of the Queen." This one's a far-future adventure of the most imaginative sort, a sequel to "The Remoras" if you remember that one.

The coming months will see a variety of different sorts of stories, ranging from near-future social extrapolation to hearthside fantasies, Gothic adventures and tales of asteroids, not to mention stories that are just plain hard to classify. We've got contributions in hand by writers both familiar and new, including Robert Sheckley, Jim Young, M. Rickert, Alex Irvine, and a newcomer named Ysabeau S. Wilce. The best way to make sure you read all of these stories is to subscribe now — either mail in the reply card or go online to *www.fsfmag.com* and lock in a year's worth of great reading.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

ASSISTING THE SUN: BEAMED POWER IN SPACE

"YES yes," the lady said to me after a talk I gave on writing science fiction, "but what are you doing *yourself* in science?" I was tempted to say that unlike most writers, and to the eternal gratitude of my parents, I was holding down a full-time job.

But the humor would be missed. Like three others who got Ph.D.s at the University of California, San Diego—Vernor Vinge, David Brin and Kim Stanley Robinson—I went steadily downhill after graduation, becoming a published author. But unlike them, I still do science when I get the chance.

I get letters and e-mails asking what *I* do in science, so this column traces out my primary work over the last few years, both in theory and experiment.

I've spent a lot of time working on the Planetary Society's hopes to launch its Cosmos Sail in early Fall, 2003. This thirty-meter-wide aluminized mylar disk will be the first spacecraft driven solely by sunlight pressure. Deployed from a Russian launch vehicle, the sail will open its fifteen-meter vanes at 800 kilometers altitude and then rotate them to catch sunlight's subtle pressure. It will finally realize a 75-year-old idea.

The flight engineers hope to pump its orbit higher by turning the vanes full on to sunshine on one half the orbit, then rotate them ninety degrees to avoid braking on the second half. That may raise the orbit enough to avoid deorbiting it in two months. But after a month, the Sun will get some help.

A microwave beam from the Goldstone 100-meter antenna,

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largest in the Deep Space Network, will reflect from the sail. This will be the first known attempt to exert forces on a spacecraft from the ground. The idea of doing this occurred to me when I was helping plan the mission. I admit it, I was inspired by those old magazine covers showing beams moving big things in space.

Goldstone's steerable dish radiates up to half a megawatt, but because the sail will be beyond the focal range, the beam will hit it with only about 1700 Watt. Sunlight pressure will accelerate the sail with at most 10^{-4} of a gravity, and the beam will manage roughly 10^{-7}. Still, onboard accelerometers can measure this as an in-principle demonstration of beamed power in space. The goal is to illustrate future possibilities, not usefully move the sail. The craft will send the data back to the Planetary Society's downlink center.

The beam-driven sail idea dates from 1966, when pushing light mission packages with lasers seemed a natural outgrowth of solar sailing. When illuminating the Cosmos sail first occurred to my brother James and me, we studied using a large Air Force laser for this experiment. But the laser costs a million dollars a minute to fire, whereas Goldstone's beam costs only a few hundred dollars, and NASA is picking up the cost.

Accelerating a sail depends only on the power, not the frequency of the beam. Microwave transmitters have been under development much longer than lasers; they are far more efficient and much cheaper to build. Their disadvantage is that they must have much larger antennas for the same focusing ability, but that does not matter in this case. Also, microwaves do not damage sail materials as lasers can and do not refract while passing through air.

The point of this effort is to see what a truly twenty-first-century spacecraft might look like. I've done a lot of calculations and experiments in my lab at UC Irvine as a consultant to NASA.

Whatever the source of the beam (power supply plus antenna, the "beamer"), the basic ability to move energy and force through space without moving mass is key to a new sort of spacecraft. The expensive part of this utility is the beamer, which stays on the ground where we can fix it, improve it, and then project energy anywhere within its range. Because they are low-mass (a few hundred kilograms), sails of aluminized mylar

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(or even better, carbon fiber that can withstand high temperatures) can be accelerated to high velocities, perhaps making fast missions beyond the solar system possible.

Like the nineteenth-century railroads, once the track is laid, the train itself is a small added expense. Compared with rockets, sails are very cheap, once the beamer is built. Just as railroads opened the American West, a beamer on Earth — or for better focusing ability, in orbit — could open up the frontiers of our solar system and beyond.

The spacecraft would be light and fairly cheap, so many could be sent at low per-shot cost. The low mass of sails could allow launch from Earth-based or orbiting microwave transmitters, imparting high velocities.

Interplanetary spacecraft must fight their way out of the Earth's gravitational well, but the neglected virtue of this is that sailcraft that have not escaped Earth's clasp must return on an elliptical orbit. A sail will repeatedly revisit a beamer in orbit, climbing to higher altitudes as the beamer's impulses add each velocity increment. After hundreds of orbital raisings, the sail departs into interplanetary space, where sunlight can push it farther.

Other applications include fast missions to Mars, if an eventual manned expedition needs low-mass replacement parts or medical supplies. A sail could decelerate in the Martian atmosphere, then descend by parachute.

To study such ideas, a team including me and my brother Jim has actually "flown" sails at JPL and UC Irvine. We did experiments with both tissue-thin aluminum sails and with small sails a few inches across made of pure carbon fibers.

Ten times thinner than a human hair, these micro-fiber mats can endure very high temperatures. They weigh in the range of ten grams per square meter — lighter than tissue paper, and competitive with the very lightest aluminized mylar sails. They are intrinsically stiff as well, and can remember their shape after being rolled or folded, as deployment tests have demonstrated.

Carbon sails could dive to very near the Sun and withstand heating far beyond possible with current spacecraft, up to 2000°K. Theoretically, this opens up missions for sails accelerated by ultrastrong sunlight to velocities in the range of 100 km/sec, for fast missions beyond Pluto.

It's a cute idea — but could we

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show it? We put the sails in a chamber the size of a Volkswagen, pumped out the air, and hit it with microwaves. The very first try, the sail lit up (hot!) — then flew up and smacked onto the chamber ceiling. Cheers.

Repeatedly we showed lifting and upward flight of ultralight sails. The carbon-carbon microtruss material easily survived several gees acceleration. To propel the material, we sent a ten-kW microwave beam into a vacuum chamber. At microwave powers a hundred thousand times sunlight, the sails reached 2000°Kelvin (from microwave absorption) and survived. Carbon is one of the few materials that can take such temperatures and survive as a structure. This capability of carbon rules out most materials for hot, high acceleration missions. For example, present spacecraft would melt away at 1000°Kelvin.

Still, a mystery arose. Data analysis and comparison with candidate acceleration mechanisms showed that the beam's purely electromagnetic pressure accounted for only three to thirty percent of the observed acceleration, so another cause was acting.

This led to another new idea. I remember reviewing the data and suddenly thinking, "This mysterious effect messed up a nice experiment, but maybe the universe is trying to tell us something. This is *better* than the idea of pushing sails with just light pressure. But what?"

Back to the data.

Analyzing the gases blown off the sails with the beam on, we found that the main thrust came from molecules embedded in the carbon fibers during manufacture. This is called sublimation or desorption, and the higher the temperature, the more thrust results. We believe that the main lift in our experiments came from carbon monoxide being liberated from the carbon fibers, at temperatures above 2300°K.

The thought immediately came: This might be a useful propulsion mechanism — a wedding of the solar sail idea with classic rocket engineering. Flat sails make poor rockets because there is no nozzle. On the other hand, they carry no engine.

How effective is desorption relative to the photon reflection for which sails are designed? The ratio of accelerations is greater than ten, and can be as high as ten thousand at high temperatures. For example, for molecular hydrogen, the ratio is 10,000 for temperatures of

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1000°Kelvin. This means that a beam source can exceed acceleration by sunlight if it illuminates the sail for only a small fraction of the sail's orbit time around the Earth. Such a large multiplier is the essence of the assisted beam-driven method.

Our calculations show that this could shorten the escape time from Earth's gravity well to weeks, compared with years for solar sails. The sail returns to near the beam source on each loop of a steepening ellipse. Gravity is the enemy, but at least it does bring the sail back to a beamer — say, one sitting in a circular orbit, awaiting — on an obliging ellipse. This would be a unique advantage to beam-driven sails, enabling repeated high accelerations and course corrections.

Plausible scenarios using about 100 MW microwave beam powers allow fast beam-plus-solar sailing missions to the outer solar system. This in turn opens missions using the close approaches to the Sun.

A voyage beyond Pluto could begin with a carbon sail's deployment in Low Earth Orbit by conventional rocket.

An orbiting beamer then launches the sail from nearby with a microwave beam in orbit. Once free of Earth, it can use sunlight to navigate inward to near the Sun.

I called this craft the Sundiver. The term is old — I gave it to David Brin when he first came to see me, back when he was struggling with his first novel. (As he now recounts, I asked him how his craft that literally plunges into the Sun could survive. He answered that he would throw in some jargon, techtalk, whatever. I disdainfully replied, "Oh — magic." So David went home and found a physically possible way to do it, confounding me.)

Consider the sundiving sail. Approaching the Sun turned edge-on (to prevent the increasing flux of sunlight from pushing against its fall), the carbon sail heats up. At closest approach, the craft could turn to absorb the full glare of the intense Sun, gaining a high velocity as it accelerates strongly, under desorption. It exhausts the store of molecules lodged in its fibers, losing mass while gaining velocity. It then sails away as a conventional, reflecting solar sail. Its final speed could be high enough to take it beyond Pluto within five years. There it could do a high velocity mapping of the outer solar system, the heliopause and beyond, to the interstellar medium — the precursor to true interstellar exploration.

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Such maneuvers demand a lot of sail acrobatics. The worst problem, as we discovered in experiment, recalled a classic stunt. Chinese performers can balance plates on the ends of sticks by spinning them; without spin, they fall off. A sail riding a beam is in the same fix. Spinning helps a lot. But how to spin it up, and keep adjusting spin for the whole ride? Could we use the beam to do this?

Back to the notebooks.

In experiments at JPL and UC Irvine we used circularly polarized beams to make carbon sails spin by absorption of the beam. The angular momentum in the beam simply gets deposited in the sail. Microwave powers of 100 watts — the power of a light bulb! — spun carbon cones a few cm across up to a cycle/second.

Somewhat surprisingly, even good electrical conductors like aluminum can be spun if they are not cylindrically symmetric. This is a geometric effect from interference of the waves in the beam when they reflect from the sail.

Classic disk sails won't spin, but introducing cuts or struts or making them otherwise nonsymmetric lets them spin readily. Sometimes this geometric approach proves more effective than through material absorption, as with carbon. All this was new to electrodynamics, a field 150 years old, but still rich in new phenomena.

As a mechanism to unfurl sails in space, electrodynamic spinning allows the beamer both to push and to spin with the same beam. Here, too, lasers fail. Since the spinning effect depends upon the wavelength of the electromagnetic beam, the far shorter wavelengths of lasers cannot spin sails.

With spin, stability and control during beam-riding become easier. Even if the beam is steady, a sail can wander off the beam if its shape becomes deformed, or if it does not have enough spin to keep its angular momentum aligned with the beam direction in the face of disturbances.

Generally, sails without structural elements cannot be flown if they are convex toward the beam, as the beam pressure would make them collapse. On the other hand, the beam pressure keeps concave shapes in tension, so they arise naturally while beam riding. They will resist sidewise motions if the beam moves off center, since a responding net sideways force restores the sail to its position.

Therefore, we concentrated on

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a conical shape for the sail and studied its dynamics in numerical simulations. Experimental data showed that the beam-riding effect does in fact occur. With microwave powers of a few hundred Watts we could hold an otherwise unstable sail steady, if the focused beam power falls off fairly quickly with angle from the central axis.

We are now studying how active feedback can stabilize such sails, with a team at the University of New Mexico. Those Chinese spinning-plate acts knew a lot we're just discovering. So far, the only sail shape that is stable, riding the beam, is shaped like a shallow Chinese hat — not a disk! Who knew?

These ideas and experiments interlock with another older idea: transmitting solar energy collected by platforms in orbit down to Earthly consumers. Receivers on the ground would collect the microwave beams and turn them into electrical power.

Such Space Solar Power, or SSP, intersects these sail ideas well. A beamer would be the workaday SSP array, but then could be used for only minutes at a time to push a sail as it came around again in its lengthening, elliptical orbit. Uniting domestic energy technology with deep space exploration answers the critics who say NASA's explorations yield little benefit.

More exotic approaches beckon in future. Advanced "smart sails" could have electronic circuits dispersed in the sail area. The circuit elements would not be wires but rather the carbon fibers themselves. Carbon carries electrical current, and with future developments could carry out on-board computing. Uniting such functions means that the same mass in carbon both absorbs momentum, electrical energy (charging its batteries) and even broadcasts back to Earth on command, using the type of phased array circuitry that the Deep Space Network employs every day. The sail becomes its own antenna.

All these ideas beckon at our horizons. To make the solar system ours, we must envision using propulsion methods beyond those of the chemical rockets developed more than half a century ago. The railroad was a utility that still does yeoman work today, though it gave way to the auto and the airplane.

Sending energy and momentum through space faces limits in the focusing ability of antennas and the properties of ultra-light materials. Before we see spacecraft

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handled at a distance purely electromagnetically, in true hands-off style, we will have to use bold, fresh thinking.

So what does twenty-first century space flight look like? Plenty of beam-assisted sails zooming around the solar system and beyond, each one fairly cheap and thus expendable. No more precious craft like *Cassini* (due at long last to reach Saturn in July 2004, a project that began in the late 1970s) whose loss would mean a billion bucks down the drain.

Nuclear rockets to move people and supplies. Beam-driven sails to give fast, pony express backup to manned expeditions on Mars or the asteroids. Break a five-gram widget? Ask for one pronto on the sail express. The Space Solar Power utility takes a few minutes of its time — usually it's exporting gigaWatts of power to power grids down on the Earth — to push the sails out into interplanetary space. The sails are a sideline to the real business of powering the ever-power-hungry multitudes below.

But of course we have a long way to go to make this happen. Basic physics — my line of work — must be followed up by real engineers who find out how to fly the tricky, light craft. Building the beamer in low Earth orbit will be pricey, maybe several hundred million dollars — but like railroad track, it would pay for itself over time.

All this hinges on how much we want to explore, to venture, and perhaps to profit in space. Alas, that's politics — not my area.

I prefer to stay in the lab, pushing my pencil in calculations. It's closer to the future, and more fun.

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Garth Nix lives near Sydney, Australia, with his wife Anna and their young son Thomas. His most recent novels include Abhorsen *(third in the series that began with* Lirael *and* Sabriel,*) and the second book in his "Keys to the Kingdom" series,* Grim Tuesday. *"Heart's Desire" takes us back to the Matter of Britain with an interesting look at magic and its price.*

Heart's Desire

By Garth Nix

"TO CATCH A STAR, YOU must know its secret name and its place in the heavens," whispered Merlin, his mouth so close to Nimue's ear his breath tickled her and made her want to laugh. Only the seriousness of the occasion stopped a giggle. Finally, after years of apprenticeship, Merlin was about to tell her what she had always wanted to know, what she worked toward for seven long years.

"You must send the name to the sky as a white bird. You must write it in fire upon a mirror. You must wrap the falling star with your heart's desire. All this must be done in the single moment between the end of night and the dawning of the day."

"That's it?" breathed Nimue. "The final secret?"

"Yes," said Merlin slowly. "The final secret. But remember the cost. Your heart's desire will be consumed by the star. Only from its ashes will power come."

"But my heart's desire is to have the power!" exclaimed Nimue. "How can I gain it and lose it at the same time?"

"Even Magi may not know their own hearts," said Merlin heavily. "And it will be the whole desire of your heart, from past, present, or future.

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You will be giving up something that may yet come to pass if you choose not to take a star from the sky."

Merlin looked at her as she stared up at the sky, watching the stars. He saw a young woman, with the dark face and hair of a Pict, her eyes flashing with excitement. She was not beautiful, nor even pretty, but her face was strong and lively and every movement hinted at energy barely contained. She wore a plain white dress, sleeveless but stretching to her ankles, and bracelets of twisted gold wire and amethysts. Merlin had given her the bracelets, and they were invested with the many lesser magics that Nimue had learned from him in the last three years.

There were other things that Merlin saw, out of memory and with the gift he had taken from a falling star.

There was the past, beginning when a headstrong girl no more than fourteen years old sought him out in his simple house upon the Cornish headland. He had turned her away, but she had sat on his doorstep for weeks, living off shellfish and seaweed, till at last he had relented and taken her in. At first he had refused to teach her magic, but she had won that battle as well. He could not deny that she had the gift, and he could not deny that he enjoyed the teaching. Over the years that enjoyment in teaching her had become something else, though Merlin had never shown it. He was nearly three times her age, and he had spent many years before Nimue's arrival preparing himself for the sorrow that must come. He had not expected it to be as straightforward as simply falling in love with an impossible girl, but there it was.

There was the present, the two of them standing upon the black stone with the new Sun shining down upon them.

The future, so many possible roads stretching out in all directions. If he wished, Merlin could try to steer Nimue toward one future. But he did not. The choice would be hers.

"My heart's desire is to gain full mastery of the Art," Nimue said slowly, "I can only gain that mastery by the capture of a star, yet that capture depends upon the sacrifice of my heart's desire. An interesting conundrum."

"You should stay here and think on it," said Merlin. He stepped down from the black stone, the centerpiece of the ring of stones that he had built almost twenty years before. The black stone had been the most difficult, though it was small and flat, unlike the standing monoliths of granite. He

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had drawn it out of the very depths of the Earth, and it had smoked and run like water before he forced it into its current shape. "But breakfast calls me and I wish to answer."

Nimue smiled and sat cross-legged on the stone. She watched Merlin as he walked away. As he left the ring of stones, the air shimmered around him, bright shafts of light weaving and dancing around his head and arms. The light sank into his hair and skin, and when it finally settled, Merlin's hair was white and he appeared to be much older than he really was. It was a magical disguise he had long assumed, Nimue knew. Age was associated with wisdom, and Merlin had also found it useful to appear aged and infirm. Nimue expected she would probably do the same when she came into her power. A crone was always much more convincing than a maiden.

Not that she expected to be a maiden too much longer. Nimue had her own plans for that step from maiden to woman grown. Merlin was part of that plan, though he did not know it. No village boy nor even one of Arthur's warriors would do for Nimue. Merlin was the only man she had ever wanted in her bed. There had been some who had tried to influence her choice over the past few years, against all her discouragement. A few were still around, croaking and sunning their warty hides down in the reedy margins of the lake. Nimue was surprised they had lived so long. Most men died from such transformations. Sometimes she fed them flies, but she never let them touch her, either as toads or men.

Nimue turned her thoughts from failed suitors back to the conundrum presented by Merlin. Her heart's desire was to have the power, yet she would lose her heart's desire to gain the power. How could this be?

She scratched her head and lay down on the rock, letting the heat from the Sun fall upon her. Unconsciously, she turned her palms up to catch the rays. The Sun was a source of power, one she used in many lesser magics. It was good to take in the Sun's power when the sky was clear, and she no longer even needed to think about it. Nimue could draw power from many sources: the Sun, the Earth, the moving stream, even the spent breath of animals and men.

What had Merlin lost? Nimue wondered. What was his heart's desire? He must have wanted the power as she wanted it. He had gained it, and as far as she could see, he had lost nothing. He was the preeminent wizard of the age. The counselor and maker of Kings. There was no knowledge he

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did not have, no spell he did not know.

Perhaps there was nothing to lose, Nimue thought. Or if there was, it would be something she would never miss. A heart's desire that could come to pass but did not was no loss. To see the future was not the same as to live it. Perhaps she would see her heart's desire in the hearth fire, and would know it could never be. How much of a loss was that?

Nothing, thought Nimue. Nothing compared to the exhilaration of magic.

"Tonight," she whispered and she curled up on the black stone like a cat resting up in preparation for extensive wickedness. "Tonight, for everything."

MERLIN WAS NOT ASLEEP when she came to his chamber. He lay on his bed, but his eyes were open, gleaming in the thin shaft of moonlight from the tower window. Nimue hesitated at the door, suddenly shy and afraid. She had chosen to come naked, but with her long dark hair artfully arranged both to cover and suggest. She had taken a long time to get her hair exactly right, and it was held in place with charms as well as pins.

"Merlin," she whispered.

Merlin did not respond. Nimue drifted into the room. Her skin seemed to glow with an inner light and her smile promised many pleasures. Any man would rise and take her to his bed in eager haste. But not Merlin.

"Merlin. I shall go to the black rock before the dawn. But I would go as a woman, who has known her man. Your woman."

"No," whispered Merlin. He did not move, but lay as still as the chalk-carving on the green of the hill. "There are men aplenty in the village. Two of Arthur's knights are visiting tonight. They are both good men, young and unmarried."

Nimue shook her head and stepped forward. Her hair fell aside as she knelt by the bed, her magic dissolving and the pins unable to hold on their own.

"It is you I want," she said fiercely. "You! No one else. You want me too! I know it, as well as I know the ten thousand names of the beasts and the birds that you have taught me."

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"I do," whispered Merlin. "But I am your teacher, and it is not meet that we should lie together now, unequal in years and power. Go back to your own place."

Nimue frowned. Then she rose and stamped her foot, then whirled away, light and shadows dancing in her wake. At the door, she looked back and her smile shone through the dark room.

"Tomorrow, I shall be my own mistress and you will not be master," said Nimue. "I will catch my star and we can be as man and wife."

Merlin did not move or answer. In an instant, Nimue was gone, and the room was silent once more. The shaft of moonlight slowly crawled over Merlin's face, and darkness hid the tears that welled up out of his clear blue eyes. Young man's eyes, unclouded by age or glamour.

"Ah well," he muttered to himself. "Ah well."

They were the words Merlin's father had said upon his deathbed. Simple words, devoid of magic, greeting a fate that could not be turned aside.

Nimue did not go back to her own bed. Instead she put on her best linen dress, that she had dyed herself, blue from isatis bark, and stitched with silver thread that she had spun out of the deep earth.

That thread shone in the moonlight as she slipped out of the house and on to the headland. There was a pool at the edge of the western cliff, a pool of soft water, fed by spring and rain. It was always placid, mirror-like, in sharp contrast to the sea that crashed on the rocks only a few paces away, but two hundred feet below. An ancient hawthorn tree leaned over the pool, all shadows and spiky branches. It had often been mistaken in the dark for a giant, or some fell creature. Every midwinter night, some hapless stranger would seek to use the power of the pool, only to flee in panic from the hawthorn. Invariably they found the cliff-edge and the pounding sea that would grind their bones to paste.

Nimue stood at the edge of the pool and hugged herself against the bite of the wind, cold in this early morning. She whispered to herself, preparing for what must be done.

To find the secret name of a star
Ask the Moon that shares the sky
Fix its place between the branches of the hawthorn tree
Send the name to the sky on the wings of a bird
Burn the name in fire upon the mirrored waters of the lake

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Wrap the star with heart's desire
Between the darkness and the light
Then you shall a magus be....

Nimue looked up to the heavens, and found the great disc of the Moon, yellow as ancient cheese. She let its light fall upon her face and open hands, and took in its power. But a yellow Moon was not what she sought. She waited, silent, the hawthorn tree softly groaning in the wind, the surf crashing deep below.

Slowly the Moon began to sink and change. The yellow faded and blue-silver began to spill across its face. Nimue felt the change, and smiled. Soon she would ask it to name her star. She had already chosen one. A bright star, but not so bright it might overpower her. Not the Evening Star, that served no one and never would. But a star as bright as Merlin's, though not as red. She would be his equal in power, if not in kind.

A bird called, the sleepy cry of something woken before its time. The wind fell and the hawthorn stilled. Nimue felt a tremor rush through her. Dawn was only minutes away. The Moon was silver, she must act.

She called to the Moon, a call that no human ears could hear. At first, there was no answer, but she had expected that. She called again, using the power she'd drawn earlier from the Sun. The Moon grew a fraction brighter at the call, and through the void, her silver voice came down, quiet and imbued with sadness, speaking for Nimue alone.

"Jahaliel."

As the name formed in her head, Nimue sank to one knee and looked up through the branches of the hawthorn. There, in the fork where two twisted branches met, she saw her star, bright between two strands of darkness.

Nimue splashed her hand in the pool and the droplets flew into the air to become a white bird, a dove whose wings made a drum-roll as it rose straight up toward the sky, the name of the star held in its beak where once it would have carried an olive branch.

The pool was still before Nimue's hand left it, still and shining, reflecting the woman, the tree, the Moon and sky. With her forefinger and all that was left of the Sun's power within her, Nimue wrote in fire upon the mirrored water, the three runes that spelled out the name "Ja-hal-iel."

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In the heavens, a star fell. The Moon sank, and the Sun rose.

In the instant between night and day, Nimue caught her star and bound it forever with the promise of her heart's desire.

She felt something leave her, and tears started in her eyes. But she did not know what she had lost, and the exultation of power was upon her.

Nimue ran to the cliff top and threw herself into the air. Like a feather she drifted down, buffeted this way and that by the wind, but taking no harm. Before the cold water embraced her, she became a dolphin, plunging into a wave, sliding under the water to spin out the other side, laughing as only a dolphin can.

Nimue had been a dolphin before, but it was Merlin who had made her so. It was his star's power that had given her the shapes of many things, on sea and air and land. Now she could transform herself at will. She jumped again and between two waves became a hawk, shooting up above the spray. A merlin, to be exact, and that was her joke and tribute. On bent back wings she sped across the headland, past the pool, toward the rising Sun and Merlin.

With sharp hawk eyes she saw he had already risen, and was waiting for her in the ring of stones. He stood upon the black rock, without a glamour upon him, and Nimue felt love for him rise in her heart as bright and strong as the rising Sun.

She flew still higher, till she was directly above Merlin and he had to shade his eyes to look at her. Then she folded her wings and dropped straight down, down into his open arms.

They had one kiss, one brief embrace, before the stars they wore pushed them apart, the air itself wrenching them from each other's grasp. Nimue shouted and directed her will upon her new-found power, to no avail. She was pushed completely off the black stone, to fall sprawling in the circle.

Merlin did not shout. He had fallen on his back, and was sinking into the black stone, as if it were not stone at all, but some peaty bog that had trapped an unwary traveler.

He did not shout, but his voice was loud and clear in Nimue's ear as she struggled to her feet.

"You were my heart's desire, Nimue, waiting in the future, you were the price I paid for the art. Love never to be fulfilled. Forgive me."

His hand stretched up from the stone. Nimue snatched at it, as if even

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now she might somehow pull him back. But her hand closed on empty air, and his disappeared beneath the surface of the stone.

"Forgive me, Merlin," whispered Nimue. She made no effort to stem the tears that fell upon the rock. A bright star shone in the hollow of her neck, the promise of power and wisdom beyond anything she had ever dreamed. But she was cold inside, cold with the knowledge that this power was not her heart's desire. Her true heart's desire lay entombed in dark stone, beyond her reach forever.

Or was he? Nimue clutched her star and looked up at the sky, so bright above her. If a star could be plucked from the sky, then surely it could also be made to rise again? To take its place in the firmament once more, unraveling all the threads of time that had been woven in its fall. If she could return her star, then surely Merlin would freely walk the Earth, and he in turn could free his star and regain his heart's desire.

There were other powers in the world. Other places to find knowledge. Nimue stretched her slim arms above her head and in a moment was a bird, wide-winged and far-sailing. She rode a wind west, across the open sea, and was gone from Britain.

With her went all Merlin's wisdom and power, and all hope for the kingdom of Arthur. The kingdom would sink into ruin as Nimue's heart's desire had sunk into the stone. ☙

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John Peyton Cooke is best known for his work in the crime and mystery field, including the novels Torsos, Haven, *and* The Chimney Sweeper. *His short story "After You've Gone" was recently reprinted in* Best American Mystery Stories 2003. *He lives in Katonah, New York, and works as vice president at a medical communications firm. His sister Catherine Cooke Montrose published a story with us back in 1990. His own* F&SF *debut is a dark fantasy that takes us into a world that may be as alien to some readers as anything dreamed up by Cordwainer Smith, and yet may be as familiar to other readers as walking out the door. (This world we're on is fairly big, isn't it?)*

Serostatus

By John Peyton Cooke

A SWAMPY HEAT ENVELOPED Tom as he emerged from the refrigerated multiplex into the midnight of a summer's eve under the starless sky of electric Manhattan. Tired, he negotiated his way around the slow-walkers and loud-talkers along West 23rd Street, blubbering and blowing their noses and debating the genius of the movie's *auteur*. Meanwhile, a new batch of victims was standing on line for the late show, eager to subject themselves to three hours of carnage engineered by the best fakers in the business.

It was another Hollywood go at World War II, with flurries of enemy machine-gun bullets killing random American soldiers with gory efficacy — the ones who asked their pals if they wanted to live forever, the ones who pined for their mothers, the ones who clowned in the face of the Axis, even the hero who planted the flag of democracy on the beach as he bled to death. All of them, all dead — on celluloid. Which was like Bill Gates losing a billion dollars after a down day on Wall Street — it was all "on paper." This was only a movie, after all, and no movie could ever convey

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the realities of a war to those who had had the good fortune to be elsewhere.

Tom thought of Eric and felt a blast of air-conditioning from somewhere, but it was gone as soon as it had arrived. Perhaps he was coming down with something. He doubted it; he never got sick. He had passed no open doorways and in fact was walking atop a subway grate, under which a train was passing and blasting him with the heat of Hades.

It must have been so easy in the old days, when all you had to do was go down Below and retrieve your lover, provided you were heroic enough, like Gilgamesh. And if you weren't, you could always hire Hercules to make the journey for you. Deals could be brokered. Pluto was not unreasonable. All was not necessarily lost.

Tom rounded the corner at Eighth Avenue and felt a pang of dread at running the gauntlet this evening. All the young men were out, as usual, hanging around in packs outside of The Break and the Big Cup coffee joint and streaming around the corner from Barracuda. Big muscles and tank tops and tight shorts and bulges and tanned flesh and fresh faces and laughter and eyes sizing you up as you passed. Except that for Tom, the eyes no longer turned his way. The twentysomethings and thirtysomethings must have seen him in their peripheral vision and known he was too old to warrant a glance, a wounded wolf ignored by the rest of the pack. Tom had become invisible to them, ostracized even here in Chelsea, where he had lived for twenty years. *Go away, leave us alone, look among your own kind.* Or maybe all they were saying was, *you can look, but don't touch.*

Tom smiled to himself. Truth be told, he cared little whether they looked at him or not. What these boys didn't know was that he no longer had any desire for any of them. They were young and careless; the risks were too great. He had had his wasted youth already, and after that all those years with Eric, and after Eric...well, the safest sex was none at all, and if nothing else, Tom was determined to survive, as he had done thus far. Latex from the Malaysian jungle seemed fragile protection against so insidious an enemy. Was it worth realizing afterward that the helmet that was supposed to save your life had failed to stop the bullet?

The grocery store was open all night and Tom needed things, so he went in and grabbed a basket. Skim milk, yogurt, eggs, peaches, zucchini squash, sparkling water, raisin bran, chicken breasts, toilet paper, and a

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pint of ice cream. Even here, at this late hour, the store had five or six guys in it who were shopping leisurely and cruising each other. They were all younger than Tom and never even noticed him. He walked home down West 20th Street with two bags of groceries, past pre-Civil War townhouses, under the shadowed trees, watching out for sidewalks upturned by old roots and waiting to trip him and his eggs.

Halfway down the block, he saw a vision: a drop-dead gorgeous young man (*what we would have called a* youngman *in the bad old days*, Tom thought), in bell-bottom jeans and black leather motorcycle jacket and black leather boots, who was unmistakably cruising him, leaning against a wrought-iron fence, knee jutting out in Tom's path, unlit cigarette dangling, lips wet and sultry. He was as thin as a wraith but not unhealthily so. His hair, long and full and raven-feathered, glistened with a blue sheen in the light of the streetlamp, and his earthy skin and wide-set cheekbones reminded Tom of a Native American he had met one night in the meat-packing district and linked up with a few other times — but that was ages ago, before Tom had even moved to Chelsea, when he was still a youngman himself, when this boy would still have been a baby, if he had even been born.

Tom avoided his natural inclination these days to pretend he didn't see him, and went ahead and looked.

"Got a light?" the youngman asked.

Tom gave a startled smile — though he should have expected to be asked for either this or the time — and fished out his Zippo. Lighting the cigarette, Tom noted the vibrant flame's reflection in the boy's black eyes. Remarkable how much he resembled that other youngman from so long ago. The tobacco crackled to life and the smoke wafted up, clouding the distance between them and lending the dark face an ethereal quality.

"Thanks, man," the youngman said.

Tom, feeling very much like an oldman, put his lighter away and made as if to go, but the youngman lifted his chin and raised his eyebrows in invitation. Tom could scarcely believe it.

"Come with me to the docks."

"The docks?" Tom said, thinking, *are you crazy*? Did anyone still go to the docks? Were there still any left? The docks in Chelsea had become a yuppie sports complex, and the mayor was having the Village docks

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dismantled, he thought. Besides, the police were more vigilant these days than in the seventies. That gig was up.

"Come on, man," the youngman said, reaching out and placing his hand on Tom's fly. "I want you, but not here."

Tom looked around but saw none of his neighbors, either on the street or peeping out their windows. He would have batted the youngman's hand away if his arms weren't full of groceries.

"I'm sorry," Tom said. "I've got to get home."

"Let me go with you," the youngman implored, rubbing Tom.

"Stop that," Tom said, though he wanted it to go on. But he was damned if he was going to invite this boy in. When you were twenty, you never thought your trick was going to rob you out of house and home, but at fifty, you were wise to this potentiality, especially when this boy was the youngest thing to give you the time of day since...well, since before Tom could remember.

"How about it, Dad?"

"I can't. I've...I've got a partner, see, and — "

Stop it. He's dead. Eric's dead.

"Oh, really?" The youngman cast a cool eye on Tom, drawing down on his cigarette. He dropped his hand from Tom and dug a small brown vial from inside his jacket. He unscrewed the lid, placed the vial up to his nose, and took a whiff. Amyl nitrate. Poppers. He offered it to Tom, holding it up near his nose.

"No, thanks." Tom hadn't smelled the stuff since 1984. He caught a whiff of it now, by accident, and it took him back — to the Anvil and the Mineshaft and the Everard Baths...*Jesus.*

"I want you," the youngman said.

"My ice cream is going to melt. I have to go."

Dejection in the youngman's face. Tom broke away and continued toward home. Sweat was dripping down his back, more a result of the encounter than of the humidity. Why should the kid have looked so disappointed? He could have any guy he wanted. All he had to do was go back the way Tom had come, to the Big Cup or even the grocery store. Tom was sure one of them would take him home or go with him to the docks, if there were any docks left to go to, if they hadn't been Disneyfied like Times Square.

Tom looked over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed,

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but the youngman was nowhere to be seen. He could not have run away so fast, not without a sound, not in those boots. He had to be hiding behind a stoop. Perhaps spying on him.

Sighing heavily, Tom left his groceries on the sidewalk and went back to look for the youngman and tell him to beat it. He made a quick search of the shadows, around the stoops and the garbage cans and the recycling bins, but found no sign of him. The unfinished cigarette was slowly burning itself out on the sidewalk. The scent of amyl nitrate lingered in the air for a moment and was gone — the scent of the youngman, the scent of Tom's youth, the scent of the promise of sex. He picked up the cigarette to finish it but found it so stale it was putrid.

"Oh, and a Bloody Mary for me," Edwin said, handing the brunch menu back to their biceps-flexing waiter, who perhaps was really waiting to be discovered as an underwear model. Edwin, as if in afterthought, laid three thick fingers on the waiter's hairy forearm and said, "Easy on the blood, hon, heavy on the Mary."

Tom glanced apologetically at the waiter, who was new and had never run into Edwin before. The waiter didn't notice Tom's sympathy but only smirk-smiled to himself as he went to the bar.

That brief contact of Edwin's fingers on the waiter's flesh would stay with Edwin all day and enter his dreams. Edwin worked such moments into his life as often as possible. People thought of him as touchy-feely, but they failed to realize it was no accident. Edwin's mind was always working, plotting his next free grope. That "heavy on the Mary" had likely been rehearsed, along with the hand movement. Edwin had always been thus. He took what he could get, from whomever struck his fancy.

"I would have gone with you. Why didn't you call me?"

"Hmm?" Tom's thoughts were elsewhere. Sunday brunch with his friends had been such a routine for so many years, he sometimes slept through the gossip and the chitchat — even now, when it was down to just him and Edwin. It seemed like only yesterday they had a regular crew of eight or nine on Sundays. One by one, they had been bumped off, like the characters in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None.*

"The movie. Supposed to be a lot of cutie-pies in that picture. All running around in uniform and getting all muddy."

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"Edwin, they're getting their heads blown off."

"Oh, who cares?"

"There was nothing sexy about that movie. Not unless you like bloody American entrails, or severed manly limbs, or a bullet hole in the middle of a corn-fed forehead."

"That's no excuse for not calling. What else did I have to do last night but watch some Ken Burns crap on Channel Thirteen?"

"It was lousy. You would have hated it."

"Heavy on the Mary," the waiter said, lowering the drink.

Edwin's eyes lit up at the sight of it, with its leafy celery stalk erupting over the top. He gave it one good stir and gulped down a fourth of it. "Love it," he croaked at the waiter, reaching out to stroke his arm again. "Better than Viagra."

The waiter moved out of Edwin's reach and said, "And a regular coffee, black," placing a large sloshing mug before Tom.

"For Mr. Boring," Edwin said, still piqued.

The waiter smirked again as he turned away, no doubt thinking how much he hated old queens and promising he would never become like them. No Judy Garland records, no MGM musicals, no *Auntie Mame*, no singing showtunes at Eighty-Eights, no Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. Not only that, but he would never lose his looks or die for any reason.

Tom sipped his coffee. It burned his lips. He would have to let it cool down. He watched the condensation drip down the side of Edwin's glass. The bloody Mary looked cool and inviting, but Tom dared not. He should have ordered his coffee iced, but it was too late now — if he called the waiter back, it would only look like he was trying not to be boring.

"Seems like you don't want anything to do with me anymore," Edwin said, looking for all the world like Shelley Winters in *A Place in the Sun*, sitting across from Montgomery Clift in the rowboat and saying, "*You wish I was dead*," when he had taken her out on the lake for the express purpose of drowning her.

"Edwin," Tom said, "come on, that's ridiculous."

"You never call, we don't do movies, we — "

"We're having brunch, aren't we?"

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"You're only doing it because you have to."

"Who's making me?"

"Ask yourself that."

The waiter came with their food and Edwin ordered another Bloody Mary. This time the waiter kept his distance, which was wise; you never knew where Edwin's fingers would stray next. Once, when Tom went with him to a gay Malaysian restaurant in the Village, Edwin had reached under their waiter's sarong and got his hand slapped. People had stared; Tom had wanted to hide.

"More coffee," Tom said. *Make it black, 'cause I'm boring.*

"You want to know why?" Edwin asked.

Tom poked the yolks of his eggs Benedict. *See how they run.*

"Survivor's guilt," Edwin said, mouth full of huevos rancheros. "That's the only reason you still brunch with me."

"That's not true," Tom said.

Though it probably was, in part. Of all the men in their circle, Tom had always liked Edwin the least, and all they held in common anymore was their shared grief for lost friends. Edwin had certainly never liked Eric. Tom ascribed it to jealousy; Tom and Eric had managed to have that long-term, mutually respectful, loving relationship that Edwin had proved himself incapable of. For a long time now, Tom had thought he was still putting up with Edwin out of pity, but perhaps he was right and it was guilt.

"You're embarrassed to be seen with me. I'm fat and ugly and make you uncomfortable."

"Stop it, Edwin." Tom came up with a smile. "Listen, I'm sorry I didn't call you last night, okay? I just thought you wouldn't like the movie, that's all."

"That's nice of you to say, Tom. By the way, I was thinking of going to the Film Forum this afternoon. They're showing *Mildred Pierce* and *Craig's Wife*. Care to join me?"

If I do, it'll really be out of guilt, Tom thought.

"I can't. I have to prepare for a presentation for Monday."

"I understand," Edwin said, smiling as if he'd just proven a point to himself. "When did you start working again?"

"Just this week," Tom said, but he couldn't sustain the lie for long,

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so he changed the subject: "Edwin, do guys still meet at the docks, like in the old days?"

"You're asking me?"

"There was this youngman, last night."

"Youngman?" Edwin laughed. "You're going retro on me."

"That's what I felt like, last night...like back in the seventies. This youngman was wearing bell-bottoms, and — "

"Oh, the kids are all into that look these days. The personalized T-shirts are out again, too."

"You're right," Tom said. "Back then, I remember one saying I CHOKED LINDA LOVELACE. The other day I saw one that said CHRISTINA SUCKS. BRITNEY SWALLOWS."

He was cruising me, Tom wanted to say. But it would come out all wrong. Edwin would think he was bragging — or lying to spite him — and he would become jealous and pouty. He would be no help at all in sorting it out.

"What does this have to do with the docks?"

"Nothing," Tom said.

Except I went there once with this Native American, when I was half as old as I am now, and I saw him again last night, and he invited me to join him. He said he wanted me.

"They're being dismantled, if you must know," Edwin said. "New York is family friendly now, like Las Vegas, God help us."

"Good-bye, Sodom," Tom said, raising his coffee mug.

"I'll drink to that."

"Hello...what?"

"What, indeed?" Edwin contemplated his glass, the inside of which was coated with a gloppy, tomatoey film.

"Because it sure isn't Paradise." Tom swirled the last of his coffee and downed it. It was full of bitter grounds. "Not by a longshot. Maybe Sodom wasn't so bad. Maybe you and I should have gone up in that pillar of fire with everyone else."

Edwin unscrewed the lid off the salt shaker and, with a look of triumph, dumped its contents into Tom's empty mug.

"No looking back," Edwin said. "They wouldn't want that."

Tom wet his fingertip, stuck it in the salt, and licked it off. It tasted like sex, the way sex used to be.

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How do you know? he wondered. *How do you fucking know what they would want*?

TOM OPENED the freezer door and hastened the pint of ice cream out of its niche between the ice cube trays and the vodka, which he could identify by its metallic cap, though the bottle itself was obscured by the encroaching frost of more than half a year. Months ago, Tom had nearly thrown it away, but in the end had let it be, as a reminder that he had slain this particular dragon without any twelve-step program or other hocus-pocus. The desire, or need, had simply abandoned him, sometime after he buried Eric. Still, he had concluded the bottle was not without its utility; he could always chip it out of the ice if Edwin or some other guest *(what other guest?)* came over.

He nursed the ice cream as he entered his study, scooping out spoonfuls and sucking them down without hardly considering. The curtains were sashed open but the drawn shifts glowed with sunlight. Eric, whose bed had been situated parallel to the windows after they moved him in here, had requested the shifts be kept down at all times. They made the light less harsh and he enjoyed watching them billow with the breeze in their random, ghostly way. Even after the last drug cocktail failed and the cytomegalovirus finally finished off his retinas, Eric wanted the windows open whenever possible so that when Tom could not be present, the shifts were there to keep him company with their shadow show. Eric said he could feel their subtle touch on his flesh, even at night, even in the absence of moonglow.

The room was musty now with book dust and cigarette smoke, the result of Tom's efforts to replace the odors of the sickroom. He had moved in his computer, drafting table, and bookshelves after getting rid of the bed and everything else, but he had done precious little work here through the entire winter and spring — mostly pleasure reading and chain-smoking. Realizing now that the room had gone too far in its new direction, Tom placed the ice cream on his computer desk and went to open a window. It held fast from the humidity, but when Tom wrenched it loose, a gust of wind lifted the shift and plastered it against his face.

Freeing himself from it, he felt his breath catch, and a sudden pain in

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his chest, and a panic as if he were suffocating. But the moment passed as soon as he managed to grab the shift and fix it in the sash. He planted his palms on the gritty windowsill and stuck his head out the window for some air. He had to squint in the bright sun. As he looked at the people walking down below on West 20th, he saw a man leaning against the tree right in front, knee jutting out, arms folded across his chest. His face was obscured by the leaves and their shadows. Still, Tom couldn't help but wonder if it was the youngman from last night, waiting for him, wanting him.

"Hey!" Tom shouted.

Startled, the man moved away from the tree, and Tom caught a flash of his face in the dappled sunlight before the man turned his back on Tom and crossed the street to disappear behind a panel van. It was enough of a glimpse for Tom to realize it was not the raven-haired youth of last night. In fact, the man looked something like Eric — the Eric of fifteen years ago, the Eric Tom had met at Fire Island, the vital Eric, the essential Eric. And that, of course, was impossible, because it was here in this room that Tom had held Eric's hand as he slipped away.

"Wait!" Tom called, and rushed out of his apartment and ran down the stairs. *Please wait....*

When he got outside, he crossed the street to the panel van and saw the man walking leisurely at the end of the block, turning the corner at Eighth Avenue, heading north. Tom ran to the corner and followed through the thick Sunday Chelsea crowd, keeping an eye on the back of that head that looked so much like the back of Eric's — when he had more hair. Tom brushed against people awkwardly as he passed, chanting apologies. It was impossible to run, but he was still gaining ground.

At West 23rd, the man crossed the street carelessly against the light. Tom started across, but a Mercedes blared its horn at him and nearly sideswiped him. He waited at the curb, catching his breath while the cars and yellow taxis passed. Across the street, the man's head bobbed down the subway steps and vanished from view. At the green light, Tom followed across the street and descended into the lower depths, past the token booth and its sleepy guardian and through the turnstiles, with the aid of his trusty MetroCard, just as a C train was screaming to a halt on the platform. The doors opened and loosed a cargo of sweaty passengers.

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Tom saw *him* getting on the train four cars up the platform. Having only a few seconds, Tom pushed his way past the off-loaders and hustled inside before the doors shut.

The C train pulled out of the 23rd Street station, heading uptown. The conductor said something unintelligible to that effect over the crackling loudspeaker, adding, "*Nekft fftockhh kirtighorftreech pig fftachion ckhhh.*" Tom squeezed past the straphangers and made for the connecting door. The C train rocked back and forth under his feet. Steeling himself, he wrenched the door open and stepped into the darkness between the cars. The gap was narrow, but it seemed like a chasm. The car jump was a move well practiced by New Yorkers — a five-step thing you did in your sleep, like making your approach bowling — step out, grasp the opposite handle, cross the gap, slide the door open, step in. If you thought too much about it, you were liable to screw up. The train lurched oddly as Tom was crossing, but he was safely in the next car before he had time to panic, as they were pulling into 34th Street/Penn Station. It was nearly impossible to note all of the faces of those who disembarked. All he could hope to do was get to the third car ahead and trust that He Who Looked Like Eric was still there.

Tom thought of the many times he and Eric had been subway companions, usually not speaking much during the ride. In fact, they were never great conversationalists out of doors, whether dining in a restaurant or shopping on Fifth Avenue. When you knew each other that well, small talk was intolerable. One could always tell when the other was making unnecessary conversation. As they grew older together, Tom and Eric fell into a routine of quiet dinners out, quiet movies, quiet walks, quiet vacations. Ever since moving in together, all significant chat had taken place within the walls of their apartment. Behind closed doors, they talked each others' ears off. Eric was always talkier than Tom, but as his AIDS progressed, it became impossible to shut him up. Although he was a good listener, Tom discovered there were limits to what he could stand to hear. Sometimes Tom felt like clamping his hand over Eric's mouth and holding it there. These were the worst times, when Eric was too sick to get out, when a fine meal or a walk or a subway ride might have contented him.

The C train made three more stops before Tom was able to squeeze past all of the tightly packed passengers and make the three additional

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car-jumps. As he arrived in the fourth car, they were pulling into the 59th Street station, and Tom caught a glimpse of the young Eric as he rose from his seat and exited the car. Tom pressed his way to the nearest door, excusing himself to everyone, and made it out as the doors were closing, their rubber moldings snatching at his heel. The man was heading out the turnstiles, but twenty people had queued up between them. Tom hoped he could catch up with him outside.

Up top at Columbus Circle, Tom saw him entering Central Park, past the marble statue of a reclining Neptune. Although Tom quickened his pace and the man seemed not to be walking any faster, the distance between them was somehow maintained.

"Hey!" Tom called, getting winded. "Slow down, stop!"

He followed him past the rows of park benches that Tom remembered as cruising grounds when he had moved to the city thirty years ago — but no more. These days, they appeared to be rest areas for rollerbladers. He followed him past the restored band shell, down the steps of the Bethesda Fountain, up the neighboring footpath, across the bridge, up a hill, and past a trickling brook, to where the paths went off in all directions through the densest woods of the park, the Ramble.

"Slow down," Tom called. "I've got to rest."

The young Eric looked over his shoulder and smiled that smile that was so recognizable to Tom, from moments of intimacy, outings on a friend's sailboat, Christmas mornings, New Year's Eves, visits with nieces and nephews....

"Eric?" Tom said.

Eric hooked his finger at Tom and mouthed the words *come on* before taking a fork in the path and vanishing into the woods.

"Eric, wait!"

Ignoring the furious beating of his heart, Tom followed the path uphill to where he had last seen Eric, but there was no sign of him here. Tom breathed in deeply, taking in the moist, acidic smell of the forest, and tried to calm himself. There had to be a reasonable explanation for that smile. If he ever caught up to him, Tom would find he looked nothing like Eric at all, and he would offer an awkward apology. As long as Tom could find him.

Tom heard noises and went in their direction, up a rise and into deeper

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seclusion. To his right, he found two youngmen, the first on his knees before the other. Neither of them was Eric. Not that Tom would have put it past him, in the early days of their relationship. There had been that time at Jones Beach in the early eighties when Eric had promised to be right back, and Tom had gone to look for him some minutes later and discovered him in the bush with whomever had happened along....

Tom quietly escaped farther along the path.

"Hey, mister," came a honey-sweet voice to his left.

Tom turned and saw an eighteen-year-old guy with curly blond hair, wearing a red T-shirt with white piping on the collar and sleeves, and block lettering that said I CHOKED LINDA LOVELACE. He was leaning against an acacia with his head cocked to one side, rubbing the faded crotch of his jeans and licking his lips.

"Where did you get that shirt?" Tom asked, stupidly. He remembered the boy — or was projecting a memory onto him. They had met late one night in 1977 *(long before Eric, so why should he care?)* on a bench in Stuyvesant Square and had gone off together into the bushes. He never knew the kid's name, but he never forgot the T-shirt or the look, which was classic chicken.

"Got the time?" The kid acted nonplused, indifferent.

"You can't be the boy that I — "

"Like what you see?"

I...no, I don't think so. I don't think so at all....

"Come." The kid jerked his head up, begging Tom closer.

Damp forest leaves cushioned Tom's steps as he approached the tree. Youngmen didn't look like this anymore, even if some of them had co-opted the seventies. This was the genuine article. It really *was* him, unchanged since that night, down to the last freckle. Tom came within inches of his face. The boy's breath was hot on Tom's cheek. The rosy lips parted.

"Kiss me," he said, in a voice that echoed all around. "Or don't you like being kissed?"

Tom leaned over, closing his eyes first, as he invariably did before a kiss. He met nothing but air. His forehead bumped against acacia bark. As he reached for the youth, he opened his eyes and found himself groping the tree. He spun his head around, but the boy had disappeared.

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Giggling. He heard giggling in the forest and followed it up the path, and as he drew nearer, the sound metamorphosed into grunts, regular rhythmic grunts of pleasure. Behind a group of trees, Tom found two men, naked, standing at opposite ends of a third, filling him up while they kissed each other. Tom recognized them, though they had been tricks only, from one steamy night an eon ago at the Everard Baths, which had burned down long before Tom first encountered Eric on Fire Island. Tom's salad days. Almost impossible to imagine now that any of it had ever happened. That one night at the Everard, Tom must have had five or more men at various times. And there had been so many such nights, at the Everard and the St. Mark's and elsewhere. Many wee hours in Stuyvesant Square, bar pick-ups, rough trade in the meat-packing district. Hustlers in Bryant Park. Shady encounters in Times Square movie theater balconies. Midnight love on the rotting timbers of the docks. Lazy afternoons in the Ramble.

Tom had no idea how he had managed, out of all that, to survive, when HIV was all around him and his friends long before the virus had a name, long before even those first cases died. It was akin to charging Omaha Beach on D-Day and heading straight for the German batteries without receiving so much as a scratch. Looking back over his shoulder, all he could see for miles of beach were his dead buddies.

Tom could hear scores of men coupling in the Ramble, near and far, high and low. He wanted to shout at them: *Don't you understand where all this leads? Haven't you learned anything?*

The forest, growing darker by degrees, was suddenly calm and quiet. Tom looked at his watch. He hadn't realized it was so late. He turned back and looked through the trees for the threesome, but they were gone.

If any of them had even been here at all.

"Tom," came Eric's voice from behind him.

Tom pivoted, but no one was there. When he turned back, he could no longer recall from which way he'd come.

"Eric?" Tom called.

Eric, came the returning echo. *Steven, Ray, Bobby, Lance, Mark, Joshua, Richard, Enrique, Alex, Bill, Bernie, David, Frank, Howard, Victor, Umberto, Colin, Rex, Bruce, Lester, Jimmy*...and all those guys who had never given him their right name...and all those whose names he had never asked....

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Tom didn't want to still be in the park once the Sun was down. He picked the steepest downhill path, which soon leveled out and split into three more paths, all darkening. Tom's sense of direction had left him utterly, and this part of the Ramble seemed unrecognizable, dense and overgrown.

"Hey, Dad."

The youngman from last night, the Native American he had known at the docks, was standing before him in the middle path in his bell-bottoms, leather jacket, and boots, a wide smile on his face, cigarette smoldering between his lips. Tom remembered him now, with pleasure and unease.

"What's this about?" Tom asked.

"Come on, man," the youngman said. "I want you."

"What for?"

"We had some good times, Tom."

"Did I tell you my name?"

"Don't be that way."

"You're not there. I see you, but you can't be real."

The youngman didn't answer.

Tom approached him cautiously, holding his hand out to touch him, keeping his eyes open. He fully expected to see his hand pass right through to the other side of the leather jacket. But as soon as he was close enough to smell the smoke and the poppers, the youngman seemed to startle, and he vanished.

His image was replaced by that of an athletic guy in a flimsy tank top and Adidas running shorts running right toward Tom, who had no time to step out of the way. The runner looked up from the trail too late, and they crashed. Tom fell to the ground, dazed for a moment before the pair of tanned, lean arms reached down to grab him and help him to his feet.

"Thanks," Tom grunted, brushing leaves and dirt from his clothes. This one seemed real enough.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," the runner said. "I didn't see you. I guess I was in the zone."

"It's dark." Tom absolved him. *And I've been in a zone of my own for a while.* "Can you tell me the best way out of here?"

"Let me rest a moment, and I'll show you," he said, breathing hard.

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He bent over and placed his hands on his knees. "I'll take you out with me."

"I don't want to interrupt your run."

"I was finishing, anyway." He grabbed a hand-towel from his fanny pack and wiped the sweat from his face. "Buy you a cup of coffee? It's the least I can do."

"No, thanks, I'm all right."

"Are you sure?"

Tom thought about it for a moment. Just for a moment.

O NOW HERE they were at an outdoor café on Amsterdam Avenue, under the streetlamps, and the breeze kept wafting the scent of the runner's sweat Tom's way, and Tom kept squirming in his seat because he could hardly stand it. *He's only doing this so I won't sue him,* he thought. *Worried he might have caused the old man some harm.* His name was Jasper, and he was thirty-five and a pulmonologist, and he had an elegant, taut body that was all his own, not like the cookie-cutter Chelsea gym-boys Tom saw every day prowling up and down Eighth Avenue. Jasper was talking about his job and its stresses, but Tom was only half-listening.

"You shouldn't do that, by the way."

Tom took his cigarette out of his mouth and said, "What?"

"Smoke," Jasper said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, is it bothering you?" Tom poised the cigarette over the ashtray, ready to snuff it out.

"The smoke doesn't bother me. But if only you saw some of the lungs I get in my office. I mean, you really should quit."

"I know I should. But go on, please. You were saying?"

To Tom, it was the radiance of a guy like Jasper that spoke to the heart of the matter. Being gay — or straight for that matter — wasn't about sex. It was about aesthetics, and each person's own different appreciation of what constituted beauty. By which he did not mean that gay men had a stronger aesthetic sense. Not stronger, only different. Tom could look at women and understand that they were handsome and yet never feel *beauty* at that deeper level. Men like Jasper sparked something inside that

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said *Yes!* Most of Tom's gay friends had defined their lives by sex and their pursuit of it. For Tom, it was enough merely having coffee across from a kind of angel.

"I'm rambling, sorry," Jasper said. "What do you do?"

"I'm an architect," Tom said. "A failed one."

Jasper frowned, concerned. "Why do you say that?"

"I haven't done any work in, what, five years."

"Why not?"

Why not, indeed. Tom was worried about getting into that. It scared most people off. But Jasper was a doctor; he ought to understand about caring for people and the pain it left behind. On the other hand, once you showed your scars, you risked losing whatever beauty you might have had in the other's eyes.

"I quit my job to take care of my lover," Tom said, unable to stop himself. "He had AIDS, and he needed constant care, most of the time, anyway. He had his ups and downs. Sometimes he was well enough to get out, but there were times.... You don't really want to hear all this, do you?"

"No, please, go on." Jasper was listening intently.

"There were *many* times Eric was near death, but he always climbed back up. The virus was killing him, the drugs were killing him, and the opportunistic infections.... But I'm sure you've treated plenty of pneumocystis cases."

Jasper nodded glumly.

"I won't go into the details of taking care of Eric. I don't want to make myself out to be a martyr...which I can't be, I guess...not yet, anyway...but I mean, some years ago, he was almost dead. He was *ready* to die. He had struggled so long, and he was at peace with the idea of moving on — "

I was ready for him to go, Tom thought. But he could never say such a thing to Jasper or to anyone.

"Then the protease inhibitors became available, and his doctor started him on triple combination therapy, and it was miraculous. He sprang back. The opportunistic infections went away, he gained weight and strength, his T cells went up, his viral load went down. He could go out again, and he started to hope again. We knew better, though. Ten years we had been dealing with it together. Still, the hope was there, and Eric lost some of his bitterness — "

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"Was he bitter, really?"

"Sometimes," Tom said, and drank down the last of his coffee. "But it didn't last. Eric grew resistant to the protease inhibitor, and the doctor switched him to another one, and another one, but it didn't do any good. At the end, there just weren't any more drugs available that he hadn't developed resistance to. He slipped way back. It happened real fast. He got CMV and went blind, and then he had pneumocystis again for the first time in ages. And that was it."

"I'm sorry. That must be hard. How are you doing?"

"I'm negative, I'm healthy, I'm fine."

"I mean emotionally. I wasn't prying into your serostatus!"

"I don't mind telling you my status. Nothing's going to happen to me. I'm negative and intend to stay that way."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but when I ran into you in the park tonight, you didn't look so good."

"Thanks a lot."

"You look fine now, but when I saw you, you looked like you'd — "

"Don't say it," Tom said. "But I think I did."

"Did what?"

See a ghost, he wanted to say. He wanted to tell him. He wanted Jasper's help. He needed it, needed help, anyway, and who else could he turn to but Jasper? Edwin would be no use. But if he spoke about it with Jasper, he knew what would happen. Jasper would look at his watch and say he had to get going. He would ask Tom to give him a call, because he might be able to recommend a good psychotherapist.

"It's getting late," Tom said, getting up. When you suspected you were about to be dumped, it was always better to pull a sneak attack. "I'm sorry, Jasper, I really must be going. Thanks for the coffee, though."

"Wait," Jasper said. "Let me at least give you this." He pulled his wallet out of his fanny pack and produced a business card. "If you ever feel like you need to talk, give me a call."

"I will. Thanks."

Just talk, Tom thought. Not "Let's have a drink," or "Would you like to have dinner sometime?" or "I have to see you again!"

That was the problem with beauty: It never saw you.

* * *

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Edwin had left a message on Tom's answering machine: "Tom, if you're there, pick up. Oh, that's right, you're *working*. You probably don't want to be *disturbed* while you're *working*. I'm back from the movies, and I've been invited to a party. Very low-key, men our own age, thank goodness! You don't know the host, but he said I could bring you. He has this fabulous loft in TriBeCa, and he's looking for someone to redo it, and he's loaded. Might be a good gig for you, sweetcakes. And if not, at least you'd meet some *men!* What have you got to lose? I'll be here until nine. Call me. Or, look, I'll give you the address, it's 238 Duane Street. Come on by and tell them I sent you."

Tom grabbed the last of the ice cream out of the freezer, but it was too hard to eat. He left it out on the counter.

The shifts were still billowing in Eric's room. He still thought of it as Eric's, even though he had reconverted it back into his study, and maybe that was part of the reason why his drafting table was gathering dust, why he kept turning down freelance work, why he never bothered to call back his former employers who were begging him to return. It was still Eric's room, where he had breathed his last, and he was everywhere here, even if Tom had tried to cover him up. It was here that Tom had said, "We have to get you to the hospital," and Eric had shook his head and said, "No."

Goddamn you, Eric, for leaving me by myself.

Tom decided he should spend no more time in this room. It had been being here this afternoon that had got his imagination going. Maybe he was having an alcoholic flashback, after being dry for so long. That was possible, wasn't it? To go from drinking heavily to no booze at all, overnight, had been jarring enough. All these months later, couldn't it catch up to his mind and make him see things that weren't there? At one time or another, he had known all of those men; they were stored away in his memory and could be conjured up in his dreams, so why not in a waking dream, when he was worn out from following the one he imagined was Eric? Tom had been winded by the time he got to the Ramble. Not getting enough oxygen. Walking in a daze. The victim of an aging, addled mind.

Sometimes I hate you for being negative, Eric had said to him, at his worst moment, shortly after he had lost his eyesight. *This is never going*

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to happen to you. You're going to find a new boyfriend and live to be a hundred, and someday you'll get Alzheimer's and forget all about me, I'm telling you.

Tom closed the door to his study and locked it.

He had heard it said that lonely people lived in a world of their own making, that it was they who chose not to make friends. To a certain extent, he believed it to be true. Even after all his friends had died, he had had plenty of opportunities to make new ones. He had met people and made efforts to try to like them. But they all seemed like bad copies of other people he had known. None of them seemed real. The real ones were long gone.

That was why he couldn't go to Edwin's stupid party tonight. Men his own age. That meant men who either were going through what Eric went through *(and I can't handle another Eric)* or were survivors themselves — the unwanted, the prudent, and the just plain lucky. Tom didn't want a friend like himself. He wanted a Jasper, one with youth and beauty and vitality still on his side — as long as Jasper wouldn't die on him. *What are you saying? You don't even know if you'll ever see him again.* Tom placed Jasper's card by the phone and promised himself he would call him tomorrow, after the Sun came up and things looked good again. To call now, while he was depressed, would only make him sound like a pathetic old queen.

I don't want to ever be like that, Eric used to say, when he was young and healthy, when they spotted an elderly gay man on the street. *Like Blondie says, "Die young, stay pretty."*

The ice cream had turned to soup. Tom drank it all, damning his too-high cholesterol, and threw the container away.

He had to get out. The apartment was too gloomy, and in fact he should think about moving. He would never find another rent like the one he was paying — not for a sunny floor-through two-bedroom in Chelsea — but perhaps he should move anyway, up to Inwood or to one of the outer boroughs or to a new city altogether — somewhere far away from all the old memories.

But he couldn't solve that tonight. What he needed was a walk, through Chelsea and the West Village, among the living.

* * *

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Back when Tom first moved to Chelsea, the Village was still the center of the gay universe, and he might as well have been moving to Poughkeepsie. Some of his friends back then even refused to venture north of the border at 14th Street. Tom had been staking out territory in the land of the Puerto Ricans, who made terrific neighbors and who tolerated him while muttering *maricón* and *loca* and *puta* under their breath. Now Chelsea was all but gay, with its own look that Tom was too old and too soft to fit.

But it was still his city, and these were the manhole covers beneath his feet, endlessly purging steam out into the night air. These were the sidewalks, shared by man and dog and hosed down by Cuban doormen and Mexican busboys. This was the cobblestone street no one had bothered to pave over, the stones roundly polished by a hundred years of motorcars, the Italian workmen who laid them long since laid to rest in rows even neater. That was the Empire State Building peeking over everything, upper floors illumined in Babylonian splendor. The World Trade Center was gone, but it had never really belonged. Edwin was the only one he had ever admitted these feelings to, and that had been a mistake. "I always hated it," he'd told him two days after the collapse. He'd had to get it off his chest, and Edwin was the only person at hand: "It was so permanent, and I knew no one would ever bother to dismantle it, so I used to wish that it would just disappear. And now that it's gone, I feel guilty, as if it were somehow my fault." Edwin had stared at him stupidly without saying anything, and no doubt he had shared this as a tidbit of gossip with anyone and everyone.

Tom tried to catch the eye of a man on Christopher Street — any man — with no luck. He passed two Hispanic youths wearing baggy shorts and baseball caps and earrings, looking like any other barrio boys until you heard them open their mouths, and out came that particular cadence of speech no straight man would ever wish to adopt. There was a forty-year-old black man in designer duds, with a beautiful face and elegant shoulders, wearing a subtle, sexy cologne, staring ahead, never noticing Tom. And a thirty-year-old white guy in a skin-tight T-shirt, leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette, obviously looking for someone — but turning away as soon as his eyes met Tom's.

Tom walked to the end of Christopher to West Street, where the cars

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sped sixty miles an hour or more. This was one street in Manhattan where you genuinely had to wait for the light to change before venturing off the curb. When it was safe, Tom hurried across, toward the broad Hudson River and the docks.

What am I doing here? he asked himself. *Why bother*?

A paved walkway ran along the river here, new within the last five years, stretching from Chelsea all the way down to Battery Park, with a demarcation line painted to keep the walkers on one side and the bicyclists on the other. Even at this hour, some people were hanging out, sitting on benches, listening to boom boxes, doing figure-eights on rollerblades, laughing, touching, enjoying each other's company.

Tom walked north, toward the old docks. The lights along this stretch of the walkway were apparently burnt out and he saw no people here. Tom leaned against the waist-high concrete barrier at the river's edge and looked out over the dark waters reflecting the lights of Hoboken across the way. He followed along the barrier to what was once Pier 49 or Pier 50 or Pier 51 — how was he to know? They were crumbling, closed off by chain-link fencing and signs in red paint: WARNING — DANGER — KEEP OUT. If the mayor was dismantling them, Tom saw no sign of it — no cranes, no heavy equipment, no waste bins filled with debris.

Human debris, he thought, and distinctly heard Katherine Hepburn's voice saying it — just another voice in his head.

"Hello again."

This wasn't in his head. It was from the Native American youngman whose hair was black as night. He was sitting on the concrete barrier, where a moment ago no one had been. He looked down at Tom and offered him a comely smile.

"Who are you?"

"You know who I am," the youngman said. "If you mean what's my name, isn't it a little too late to ask?"

"What are you doing here? What do you want from me?"

"I told you already. I want you."

"I don't get it. Did Eric send you?"

The youngman shrugged. "Who's Eric?"

Someday you'll get Alzheimer's and forget all about me. Tom was too young for Alzheimer's — at least he thought so — but he wondered if

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he was experiencing some kind of dementia. His grandfather had seen people who weren't there, had carried on conversations with them, had watched football with them in his living room in Ohio, because of his dementia. Things like that ran in families, it was certainly possible, but then again....

"Can you climb this?" the youngman asked, indicating the tall chain-link fence behind him, beyond the concrete barrier. On the other side of the fence stretched a decrepit wooden pier.

"Eric's angry because I've outlived him, is that it?"

"I told you I don't know any Eric. Come on, follow me."

With that, the youngman swung his legs over the other side of the barrier and dropped down. He gripped the chain links and began climbing, seemingly without effort. But he was young.

"Come on!" he called when he reached the top.

"I don't know if I can," Tom said, but he found that he wanted to. He had to know what it was all about.

"You can do it, Dad. It's easy."

Tom found it difficult enough getting over the concrete barrier. Once at the fence, he looked to see if he could find a gap, someplace where someone had cut the wires — but no. If he wanted to know, he would have to go over. *Come on*, the voice urged in his head. *It's easy*. He had climbed fences like this plenty of times when he was young. It couldn't be that hard. He breathed in deeply and grasped the fence. He put one hand over the other and was able to stick the toes of his sneakers into the holes to help himself up. He had to go up a ways and rest, go up a ways and rest, but at last he was at the top, precariously.

The youngman was gone. He must have made his way down the other side. The pier below was too dark for Tom to see him.

"Hey you, get down from there!"

A voice from behind him — sounded like a cop — but Tom didn't look around. Too late to go back. The youngman wanted him. *Come with me to the docks*, he had said last night. *Come*.

Tom threw one leg over the top, and, maintaining a tight hold, managed to get the other leg over but scrambled desperately for a foothold. The fence was wobbling and swaying with his weight. One hand lost its grip. His feet found no purchase. He was hanging on by four fingers. He

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was just about to fall when he snagged the toe of one shoe in the fence and grabbed on again with his other hand. He stayed there for a moment, catching his breath while his heart beat fiercely. He felt very old up here.

You took the last years of my youth, Tom thought — not for the first time. He had said it before, aloud, one day when he had utterly exhausted his supply of patience and compassion. He had said it to Eric, as he lay dying. *Look at me, Eric. I gave up the best years of my life being with you and taking care of you. Staying true to you has kept me from being true to myself. It's not the life I wanted. I want to be out there having fun. I feel like I'm in a cage....*

If he didn't get down, he might lose his grip and fall to his death. He drummed up his courage, closed his eyes, and began his descent. He went down hand over shaky hand, finding holes for his toes, while the fence warped and rattled.

He made it down to safety. The cars zoomed down West Street beyond, oblivious to him. He looked for whoever had told him to get down, but he saw no one along the walkway — no one at all.

"Youngman!" Tom didn't know how else to call for him.

There was no way off the pier except to go back over the fence, and Tom wasn't ready to try that again. The three other sides dropped off into the Hudson River, and he didn't feel foolish enough to jump in. He was stuck over here, and for what?

Desperation. You're so desperate, you'd pursue sex with someone you screwed a quarter century ago on this dock and who must be dead, or he wouldn't be coming to you....

"Youngman?"

The water lapped against the piles.

"I'm out here," came the youngman's voice from the end of the pier, which was nothing more than a void extending into the subtly glimmering Hudson.

Venturing farther out seemed unwise. He could fall through an unseen hole and land on the rocks under the pier. The whole structure could collapse and take him with it. It was unsafe.

"Here, I'll help you," said a honey-smooth voice in his ear.

Tom turned with a start to find the blond youth beside him, the one

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with whom he had gone into the bushes at Stuyvesant Square, the one with the bragging T-shirt.

"No," Tom said. "I want to go home."

"Why?" the blond asked. "No one wants you there. You don't have any friends on that side. We're all over here. Come."

"But there's Edwin — and...and Jasper — "

"You hate Edwin," the blond said.

"Jasper doesn't love you," said the raven-haired youngman.

"We're the only ones who love you."

"That's right. See for yourself."

As Tom's eyes adjusted to the darkness and he looked more closely, he saw that the pier was not made of worm-eaten wood after all. The entire length and breadth of the pier was teeming with sweaty male bodies slithering one atop the other like slippery seals basking in the sun, arms reaching out, hands caressing, legs contorting, backs arching, mouths meeting, buttocks rising.... It was hard to tell where one body began and the next ended, or whether they all made up a single, writhing mass. They made a humming, hungry drone of a sound.

Looking behind him toward West Street, Tom saw Eric standing on the other side of the chain-link fence, looking not a day older than that first day on Fire Island. It was easy to see why Tom had fallen for him. He had always been a dish.

"Eric!" Tom grabbed the fence and shook it.

All he wanted now was to get back to the other side. He didn't have to stay. He could climb back over, if he tried. Maybe that was what Eric wanted, and he was merely testing Tom to see which side he would choose.

"Eric, stay there. Please! Wait for me!"

Tom reached for the fence and began to climb. The raven-haired youth and the blond grabbed at him, but he pulled loose. The mass of men pressed up against the fence, reaching their arms toward the sky. Tom made it to a few feet below the top before he had to stop to catch his breath. He couldn't, though. It was shallow, too shallow, and he felt light-headed. A sharp pain shot up his left arm, and it felt as if someone kicked him hard in the chest. He let go and began to fall, calling Eric's name.

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Tom: I lost your number. Call me sometime, let's talk. Jasper.

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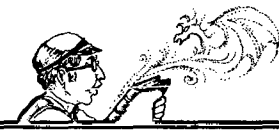

CURIOSITIES

ADVENTURES TO COME, EDITED BY J. BERG ESENWEIN (1937)

J. BERG Esenwein. That's okay, he never heard of you either. He is credited, however, with editing the very first anthology of science fiction; indeed, the very first *original* such anthology. Not that it mattered in the least; as an artifact, it's really cool, with a Buck Rogers-inspired jacket, but it had zero effect on science fiction.

Adventures to Come (McLoughlin Bros., 1937) contains nine stories (none of which you've ever read) by eight authors (none of whom you've ever heard), one Berger Copeman being represented by two entries. Assuming, that is, that Berger Copeman, Norman Leslie, Burke Framthway or any of the other authors actually existed.

Between 1908 and 1928, Esenwein wrote six courses on writing for the Home Correspondence School, and that opens the possibility that a) he wrote the stories himself using pseudonyms; b) he culled the stories from students who never again published; or c) some combination of the above. My money is on "c."

The stories include "25 Miles Aloft," "Science Steals a March," and "It's Going to Be True." Even for 1937, those titles were a bit ripe. Still, you'd think it would have had some influence, as hungry as fans were back then for *anything* stfnal, but you'd be wrong. The jacket blurb may give you an idea why: "This book contains a group of highly imaginative tales of the future.... Space ships, adventure in the stratosphere, television figure in astounding events."

Thus, although it's undeniably the progenitor of all sf anthologies, it was not mother but maiden aunt, and passed from human ken leaving no offspring.

—Bud Webster

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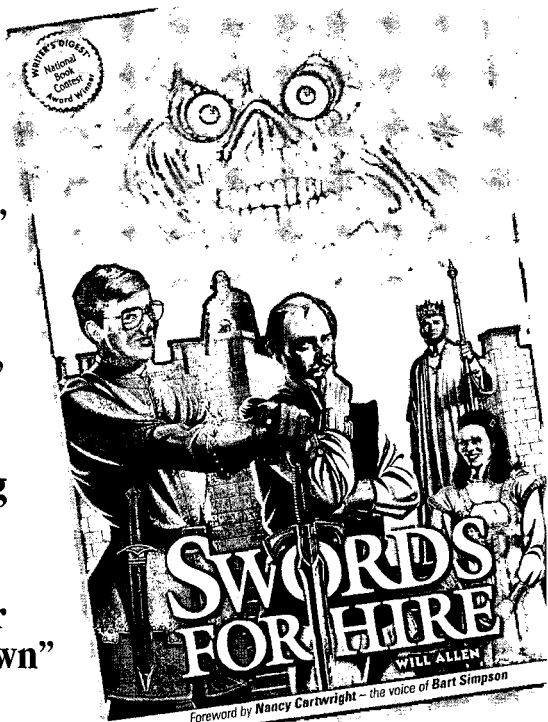
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